A Certain Man

Bryan Holland

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CHAPTER I

JOHN FFOULKES, sitting at his writing table, gazing out through the one rather dingy window of his sitting-room at the row of mean houses opposite, depressing in a monotony which even the spring sunshine failed to alleviate, felt a sudden rush of longing settle upon his soul for the little stone-built house on the Cornish coast which had been the home of his childhood and youth; for just one glimpse of the blue sea as he could fancy it would be looking on such a day as this, with the sunlight diving into the cool trough of the waves and shining green and lambent through the crests of the great curling breakers with their fringe of white foam, as they raced shorewards to dash themselves against the towering cliffs. He could picture the fishing boats slipping out between the gray weather-beaten piers of the primitive harbour to make for the open sea outside the bay, there to ride up and down on the swell while the crews waited for the school of mackerel to sweep in and fill their ready nets. The men would be calling to one another across the water in the dear familiar west country accent while the gulls, circling overhead, screeched in a frenzy of excitement at the prospect of a meal which would not entail any strenuous efforts on their parts.

The headlands, stretching their great arms into the sea, would be ablush with sea-pinks at this time of the year. On the cliffs the gorse bushes would be flaunting their golden splendour and trying to outshine the sun itself, whilst the spray, thrown up by the thundering waves as they beat impotently against the feet of those same cliffs,

would look like a handful of jewels tossed carelessly into the air by some giant hand, as the light caught and bedizened them with all the colours of the rainbow.

So vivid was the picture John Ffoulkes' imagination painted for him that, for the moment, the drab street outside his window ceased to exist, as far as he was concerned; his eyes, instead of looking out on to patched and discoloured walls of dirty yellow brick, saw, as if it were actually before him, a limitless expanse of rolling waters stretching away to the far horizon and so realistic was the vision that he found himself drawing in deep breaths as though he were veritably able to inhale the brine-laden air blowing straight across the Atlantic from Newfoundland.

It was not often that John rebelled against the state of life to which he had been called, but on the rare occasions when he did he realised something of what a caged wild animal feels as it paces restlessly up and down behind the bars which separate it from freedom. Go into the lion-house at the Zoological Gardens next time you are in that direction and watch one of the beasts who has known what liberty means and you will see, reflected in its eyes, not the crowd of curious sight-seers, not the iron bars of its cage but the trackless impenetrable jungle, the mystery of the bush on a moonlight night with its deep shadows barred with silver streaks, the barely perceptible movement of the thick undergrowth as some denizen of the forest makes his cautious way to the drinking pool, fearful of meeting an implacable foe ready to pounce and fasten its cruel claws in its back while the sharp white teeth bite into the quivering flesh.

John, like the caged wild beast, knew something of freedom because, for more than three years of the war he had served as chaplain to the forces, living a man's life among men, sharing their privations, facing with them a common danger, daily and hourly risking death or, worse still, mutilation, seeing terrible sights, hearing all around him the cries and groans of the wounded, comforting the

dying, burying the dead, yet, despite all this (or perhaps because of all this) realising something of the unfettered existence of primeval man dwelling in his cave in the thicket, hunter and hunted, a savage beast among all the other savage beasts but their acknowledged lord and master by virtue of his manhood. Primeval man, it is true, knew nothing of the irksomeness of red tape and King's Regulations, but even these drawbacks could not stop John from sharing to a certain degree his sense of liberty.

But that time was over and done with and John was back in the stifling over-crowded parish in the east end of London in which, before the war, he had been a curate and to which he had returned in a similar capacity. Once more he walked close beside sin and suffering and that desperate need of the very essentials of life which makes men forget their birthright, and the sin and suffering were not purified by their surroundings, as John had felt them to be during the war, but stalked naked and unashamed through the courts and alleys of the city marking down their victims.

Small wonder if, at times, his soul sickened within him as the realisation of his impotency to cope with the burden of the people committed to his charge grew more and more insistent, although he knew the fault did not lie with him but with the conditions of life over which he had no control.

At such times he felt inclined, like Elijah, to say 'It is enough. Oh Lord, now take away my life, this life spent amid squalor and dirt and pitiful ignorance of all that makes life sweet and clean and wholesome and put me to work in a part of Thy vineyard where I can wrap myself up in the peace of the country and forget that such things exist.'

He acknowledged the unworthiness of such an attitude, and usually he managed to battle successfully against these wild longings and regrets, but this afternoon they would not be denied and at length, unable to focus his attention on his work, he sprang up and, like the caged wild beast, began

to pace restlessly up and down the tiny room. The large square table, which occupied most of the floor space, left but little scope between it and the fireplace for any energetic movements and, with a sudden impatient shove, John sent it crashing against the chairs which stood in a prim row behind the door in order to give a wider area for his peregrinations, and was about to resume his exorcising walk when his eye was attracted by a small bunch of flowers lying on the carpet which was certainly not part of its floral design of pink roses tied with bows of yellow ribbon. He stooped and, picking it up, saw that it was composed of about half a dozen extremely faded bluebells kept together by a remnant of black bootlace wound tightly round their inadequate stalks. Where it came from or how long it had lain there John had no idea, but there it indisputably was, bearing, in spite of its jaded appearance, a message from the country to its fellow exile, and when he held it to his nostrils, there was still a trace of its delicate scent clinging to it.

He stood where he happened to be, drawing in the faint perfume, and at that precise instant a barrel organ in the street outside his window began playing a catchy tune from some musical comedy, at the sound of which two small girls on the opposite pavement commenced to dance with a kind of serious abandon, holding out their scanty skirts at each side, between thumb and forefinger, with intuitive grace, advancing, retiring, bending their supple young bodies backwards and forwards, swaying from side to side in rhythm to the gurgling accompaniment, too intent on the intricacies of their steps even to smile, though their faces were full of solemn satisfaction as they performed their evolutions with the absorbed demeanor of those who perpetuate some religious rite. An older girl, standing in an open doorway watching them, took up the refrain of the song which the organ was grinding out and her voice reached the watcher in the shadow of the room through the open window.

"Look for the silver lining
Whene'er a cloud appears in the blue.
Remember somewhere the sun is shining
And so the right thing to do
Is make it shine for you.
A heart full of joy and gladness
Will always banish sadness and strife;
So always look for the silver lining
And try to find the sunny side of life,"

she sang, and though her voice had a strident note in it and she pronounced her words with an unmistakable Cockney accent, it seemed to John almost like an injunction to throw off his black mood of despondency and, as the song counselled, "try to find the sunny side of life." That it existed even among these unpromising surroundings was evident. In the brief space of a single minute he had twice had ocular demonstration of the fact. David playing the harp to Saul had not achieved more than this east-end girl with her cracked voice and Cockney accent. The dove, returned to the ark with the olive leaf in its mouth, brought no surer token of hope than the faded bunch of bluebells picked up off the floor.

The wild longing died away in John's breast as suddenly as it had been born and he pulled the table back to its original position in the middle of the floor, straightened the chairs against the wall, rearranged the hearth rug which had got kicked into a heap, and generally ridded up the room, feeling, as he did so, that the action was the outward and visible sign of the inward and spiritual grace which had been vouchsafed. Then he went to the door and, putting his head out, shouted.

In Eddis Street, in No. 14 of which John lived and moved and had his circumscribed being, bells are an unknown luxury. If anything is wanted the person who wants it either fetches it for himself or else shouts till someone comes who will fetch it for him.

John accordingly shouted.

"Mrs. Ottoway."

There being no response to his summons he went out into the passage and shouted once more and, still failing to elicit any reply, ran upstairs two steps at a time and presently reappeared with a bottle of water and a tooth-glass which he took into the sitting room and, pouring some of the water into the glass, proceeded to arrange the bluebells in it. This done, he cleared a space on the mantelpiece by the simple expedient of sweeping a pile of papers at one end of it on to the floor which he had lately been at such pains to tidy, and placed the makeshift flower vase on the spot where they had been. Then he returned to his seat at the writing table and resumed his interrupted work which consisted of the preparation of his sermon for Sunday. He had just got into the swing of it again when a knock sounded on the door — a mere concession to etiquette apparently — for it opened simultaneously, before he had even time to say "Come in," and his landlady appeared on the threshold.

She was so large and stout and comfortable looking with such a jolly good-natured face that she at once gave an air of homeliness to the room which it ordinarily rather lacked. She was obviously a person who could be relied upon to deal with any situation which might arise, however unexpected, and, what is more, deal with it in a calm unimpassioned manner which would wear down opposition to her methods of settling things by sheer imperturbation.

She took everything in her stride, as it were, never got flurried or excited, never lost her head under any circumstances, and was equally capable of combatting a drunken man or the tax collector if either was so misguided as to show signs of fight.

From the first moment in which John set foot in her house she had taken him under her ample wing and mothered and cossetted him, although she didn't, as she quite frankly told him, when he came to see the rooms, "hold

with parsons," and was accustomed quite openly and without restraint to talk in his presence of the " monkey-'ouse," which was her designation of the clergy house in the neighbouring parish. It was impossible to take offence at her remarks for she made them in such a light-hearted indulgent way that all the sting was taken out of them, and even the inmates of the " monkey-house " who occasionally dropped in to smoke a pipe and have a chat with John, chaffed her on the subject, demanding nuts and recommending her to buy a tin of Keating's for use after their visits, all of which she took in good part, never losing her temper and always ready with a suitable rejoinder.

John, in spite of his thirty-four years, she persisted in regarding as a mere boy, and indeed there was still a good deal of the boy in him which even the war had not succeeded in destroying. There was something fresh and sparkling about him which instantly touched some hidden chord in those with whom he came in contact so that they themselves felt rejuvenated.

As Mrs. Ottoway, in one of her more expansive moments, remarked to her husband when discussing their lodger, " I don't know 'ow it is but 'e reminds me of Margate," and when pressed for an explanation could only add, " It was a sunny day, and the little waves were all shining and bright."

The explanation certainly did sound silly as Mr. Ottoway was not slow to point out, but all the same it had an element of truth in it. There was some kinship between John and the sea on a sunny day. Perhaps the ocean which had been his wet-nurse and rocked him so often on her breast had nurtured in him some of her own nature so that he could but disclose it in his.

John swung round on his chair as Mrs. Ottoway came in.

" Did you call?" she enquired, a trifle breathlessly, for she had been up in her bedroom at the top of the house changing her dress and had hurried over the process at the sound of his summons and, incidentally, descended three flights of

stairs at a far greater speed than was her wont in order to answer it.

"It was only for some water," answered John. "It doesn't matter now, thanks. I got it out of my bedroom."

"Not out of the jug, I *do* 'ope," ejaculated Mrs. Ottoway.

"Why shouldn't I get it out of the jug?" asked John, a trifle mystified by his landlady's vehemence which seemed quite uncalled for.

"Microbes, that's why," retorted Mrs. Ottoway in a determined manner.

"Oh, it wasn't to drink!" John hastily assured her. "It was for those flowers on the mantelpiece."

He pointed in their direction, thus drawing Mrs. Ottoway's attention to them. Mrs. Ottoway didn't, strictly speaking, approve of flowers out of their proper place which, in her opinion, was the garden or, at a pinch, a window box, but since it was John's pleasure to have them "littering" his room she forbore to comment on their presence. The tooth-glass however was not a thing to be passed over in silence.

"Now, Mr. Ffoulkes, you know better than that, bringing the toilet-ware down into the sitting room," she said, in the admonishing tones generally reserved for children or invalids, kindly but firmly. "You'd only to call me and I'd 'ave brought you a vawse."

"I *did* call," John reminded her, feeling rather like an argumentative little boy questioning his nurse's dictum.

"But you didn't give me time to answer," Mrs. Ottoway pointed out patiently, as one reasoning with a person of slightly inferior mental calibre who must be treated with every consideration.

"To talk of time when it's a question of a woman dressing herself!" said John scornfully.

"'Ow d' you know I was dressing meself?" demanded Mrs. Ottoway.

"Because you're all unbuttoned," replied John in triumphant tones.

"Well then you didn't ought to look," replied Mrs. Ottoway, not in the least abashed, leisurely repairing the omission.

"I say, where did those bluebells come from?" asked John, reverting to the previous subject.

"One of them Fresh Air Funders, I expect. They always come back laden with rubbidge."

"But they couldn't have walked in by themselves. Somebody must have brought them," John said. "I found them on the floor."

Mrs. Ottoway's eyes and mouth suddenly disappeared inside her cheeks, which was the phenomenon that always took place when she laughed, and was accompanied by a strange gurgling sound which, as far as could be judged by external evidence, originated in that part of her anatomy called, by courtesy, her waist and, working its way slowly upwards, at last found an outlet through her compressed lips.

"Ah, maybe they *did* walk in by theirselves," she said, with ponderous humour, and was so obviously delighted with her own witticism that John, although he saw nothing excruciatingly funny in the remark, laughed in sympathy.

"I expect 'Melia took 'em in and put 'em on the table and then swep' 'em off again," observed Mrs. Ottoway, when she had sufficiently recovered from the paroxysm of mirth into which her late extremely feeble joke had thrown her.

'Melia was the "help" who came in each morning to assist Mrs. Ottoway in her household duties. She was a lanky raw-boned girl of fifteen who apparently suffered from chronic catarrh in the head and relied on sniffing often and loudly in preference to using a handkerchief. She spoke in a husky whisper, and was so distressingly humble that once, when John inadvertently trod heavily on her foot, she hoarsely murmured "Thank yer, Sir" below her breath as though he had conferred an immense favour upon her.

John accepted the explanation without comment. It seemed so consistent with what he knew of 'Melia's char-

acter that she should put a thing on the table and then sweep it off again. 'Melia, to judge from the scraps of conversation he overheard in the mornings between her and Mrs. Ottoway, spent most of her existence in carefully undoing what she had just done. If she brushed the stairs she invariably went outside the front door to shake the mat directly she had finished them and on her reëntry tramped up them with her muddy or dusty boots so that the work had all to be done again. Did she wash out a tablecloth one day, it was the sure signal for her to upset the mustard or coffee or milk over it when she cleared away the breakfast things next morning. She systematically browned black boots and blacked brown. She poured boiling water into teapots innocent of tea or, if she put the tea in, forgot to add the water. She filled saltcellars with castor sugar and, as a setoff to that, stirred salt into the milk puddings. And all the time she sniffed with maddening persistency. A sniff heralded her arrival in the morning and a sniff punctuated each retreating footfall as she wended her way homewards at one o'clock.

The house seemed almost uncannily silent the first ten minutes after she had gone. It was like sitting in a room with a grandfather clock that has suddenly stopped ticking.

"Why *does* Amelia sniff like she does?" inquired John with pardonable curiosity, the mention of her name recalling this unpleasant failing of hers to his mind.

"She's got a growth at the back of her nose, pore lamb," said Mrs. Ottoway sympathetically.

In his wildest flights of imagination John had never pictured 'Melia as even remotely resembling a lamb, and that she should be thus designated because of a growth at the back of her nose was altogether too much for him. He simply lay back in his chair and howled with laughter, and Mrs. Ottoway, although, in this case, she could see nothing funny in her remark, started to gurgle again from pure enjoyment at seeing him amused.

"By Jove!" John gasped breathlessly when he had recov-

ered himself, " I'm blest if I ever thought I'd find the silver lining in Amelia."

Mrs. Ottoway stopped gurgling and looked at him reproachingly.

" Some may call it that, Sir," she said, " but her mother calls it adenoids, and any'ow, give it what name you will, it's her misfortune not her fault and as such to be pitied not made a mockery of."

John got up from his chair and going over to Mrs. Ottoway laid both his hands on her shoulders.

" You old silly," he said, gently shaking her, " I wasn't laughing at Amelia's adenoids, I was laughing at my own thoughts. Don't you know me better than that?"

" Well, Sir, it did seem like a revulsion of nature to 'ear you acting so foreign to yourself. But there, as you say, I oughter 'a' known better," said the good woman, instantly mollified. " There's many an act of kindness I've seen you do when you didn't know I was watching. The people 'ud miss you sorely if you was to go, that they would."

" Would they? Would they really miss me?" John asked, with a sudden sense of his unworthiness discomfitingly mingled with a recollection of his late rebellious mood.

" Why, o' course they would," declared Mrs. Ottoway soothingly. " I'm sure it's wonderful the way they looks up to you."

There was no sarcasm intended in her mode of expression and John took it in the spirit in which it was meant.

" I've lately felt as if I were just a beastly failure. I get so sick of it all." The confession seemed wrung out of John against his will.

" It's the spring, dearie," said Mrs. Ottoway putting a toil-worn hand up to his arm and giving it an encouraging pat. " All young things get restless in the spring. You want to get into the country and 'ave a good caper round like the little lambs do."

A vision of himself capering like a little lamb in a country meadow rose before John's eyes but he managed with

an effort to keep back the laughter which rose to his lips. Not for worlds would he have wounded the feelings of this simple old woman who loved him. She would have been horrified if she had realised that she had called him "dearie." The word had slipped out quite unconsciously but it had not escaped John's notice and it gave him a comfortable glowing sensation in the region of his heart.

"Does Amelia caper?" he asked gravely.

"Now 'ave done with your nonsense, Mr. Ffoulkes," Mrs. Ottoway said with simulated severity. "'Melia caper, indeed! She'd better let me catch her, that's all!"

"Well, you know, you *did* say she was a pore lamb," John said.

CHAPTER II

THURSDAY was John's weekly holiday and he generally on that day "went west" as Mrs. Ottoway, with a blissful disregard of wartime phraseology, expressed it.

The very next Thursday therefore saw him starting off from Eddis Street directly after breakfast with the pleasant prospect ahead of him of twelve hours of uninterrupted freedom.

His landlady chanced to be in the passage when he came out of his sitting room ready to be off, and followed him to the door and on to the step.

"Well now, I 'ope you'll enjoy yourself, and take care of them nasty old busses in Piccadilly," she said as he departed.

Her injunction referred to an unfortunate incident which had happened the previous winter when John, alighting from a bus at the corner of Bond Street, had slipped on the greasy roadway and measured his length in the mud to his own great embarrassment and the delight of his beholders, the result being that he spent the next three or four hours in the Turkish bath in Jermyn Street while his trousers and overcoat were being, as far as was possible, restored to a condition in which he could appear in them in public.

Since that humiliating episode Mrs. Ottoway seemed to have become imbued with the idea that an omnibus in Piccadilly was, like a man in drink, a thing to be avoided if practicable but, if not, to be approached with due caution and watchful care in case it suddenly rounded on you and felled you to earth before you had time to defend yourself.

She stood and watched him, swinging down the street, with the proud air of a mother who watches her first-born son going up to the platform at prize-giving to receive a book he doesn't want from the hands of a local magnate who doesn't really care whether he has it or not.

It was only when John turned the corner and was lost to view that Mrs. Ottoway went back into the house, shutting the door carefully behind her.

"The 'ouse don't seem the same with Mr. Ffoulkes out of it," she confided to 'Melia presently, voicing her sentiments to that unworthy recipient of them simply for want of anybody better.

"No'm," replied 'Melia dutifully.

Meanwhile John, on the top of a tram on his way to Aldersgate Street station, was busy mapping out his programme for the day.

First he would do some shopping, then, when he had finished that, he would go to his club and lunch and after lunch he would put in an hour or so looking through the illustrated papers. This, he calculated, would bring him to three o'clock at which time he would start off to pay a call on his godmother who lived in Kensington. If she were at home he would have tea at her flat and, on leaving there, would proceed to a quiet little restaurant he knew of, have dinner, and wind up with a visit to the pit of some theatre.

Accordingly, having successfully carried through the first three items on his programme, the scheduled hour found him making his exit through the portals of his club to fulfill the next.

The call on his godmother was more a duty than a pleasure, if the truth be told. She was a school friend of his mother's whom he had not seen since he was a small boy, when she had come to stay at his home, and his chief recollection of her visit was the mean advantage she took of her sponsorship to forbid him to do all the things he most enjoyed and which ordinarily he was allowed to do. He mustn't run about by himself on the edge of the cliff like he did. It made her feel giddy. He must hold her hand all the time, like a good little boy. He mustn't bathe with nothing on. It wasn't nice. Nor must he bathe with the village boys. He was a little gentleman, and if he

demeaned himself in that way they might forget and treat him as if he were just one of themselves. He mustn't go out in the sun without a hat. It might make him very ill and, equally, he must not go out in the rain without a coat nor in the wind without a muffler. He mustn't paddle until an hour had elapsed after a meal. It would probably give him a dreadful *dreadful* pain in his stomach. John could still remember how she dropped her voice on the last word and spoke it with bated breath as if it were a gross impropriety for the human frame to have such a thing included in its composition. He supposed she had only been with them a week but on looking back it seemed an eternity and when she had gone he had, as a protest, escaped out of the house without a stitch on him and, in the pouring rain, had run down to the beach directly he left the table on the completion of a designedly heavy dinner, only pausing to shed his garments in the hall on his way through.

In those far-off days the road, which now ran between the little stone house and the shore, was nonexistent. There was only a sloping green meadow dividing the garden from the sands. A vehicle of any sort wishing to get from one side of the bay to the other had either to cross the beach or, if the tide was high, to go round by an inland road, which meant an extra two or three miles added to the journey. This was fortunate for John on this particular occasion, for he ran no risk of encountering any stranger on his headlong flight seawards and therefore nobody's susceptibilities were hurt by the unexpected vision of a small boy tearing across a field in *puris naturalibus* pursued by three females — his aunt, the cook, and the nondescript individual, commonly known as "the girl," who filled in the domestic gaps. Even his mother, who never under any circumstances exerted herself unduly, joined in the chase as far as the front door at which point she abandoned it in favour of an armchair by the fire. The cook, he distinctly recollected, got no further than the garden gate where she

stopped in order to recover her lost breath, she being of full habit. Half way across the field the "girl's" feet slipped from under her on the greasy slope and, with a despairing shriek, she sat down heavily upon a wet tussock studded with thistles in eight holes. His aunt, who invariably accomplished what she set out to do, was the only one who never faltered in her stride and, before he could take to the water, she was upon him and the next minute, despite his kicks and struggles, he was being borne bedwards decently draped in her shawl.

So engrossed in his thoughts was John that he narrowly escaped having another encounter with a bus in Piccadilly and it was only the candid opinion of its driver as to the blameworthiness of the sanguinary fools who had left the cage door open which brought him with a start to a realisation of his surroundings. He was annoyed at the incident for two reasons, one being that it rudely awakened him out of a very pleasant day-dream, and the other that it made him look as if he were "up from the country." It is only your Londoner born and bred who can bear the stigma of being mistaken for a countryman without flinching and he only does so because he knows it isn't true.

Safely ensconced in the Tube, however, John let his thoughts wander back to other outstanding events connected with his boyhood and young manhood at Porth Ros — that was the name of the place where the little gray stone house was in which his mother and aunt still lived, though visitors "from England," who were ignorant folk and couldn't be expected to know better, would persist in calling it Rose Porth.

He passed lightly from one incident to another, like a bird hopping from twig to twig, until at length he arrived at one where he paused to consider and, considering, felt an odd tickling sensation in the region of the top button of his waistcoat for it concerned that period when he had fallen in love for the first time and, although a man may live to be ninety and bury three wives in the intervals of a chequered career, he never entirely recovers from the

effects of that original drop of the juice of " the little western flower " laid by Puck on his sleeping eyelids.

John had been twenty-two when this wonderful event happened to him and, contrary to all precedent, this first love had, instead of being considerably his senior, been his junior by five years. Biddy, her name was, Biddy Mercer, and her mother had taken a furnished house at Porth Ros for the summer. Acquaintanceship followed as a natural course. At a small place like that everybody soon got to know everybody else. It was one big jolly party that foregathered on the beach each morning to bathe, or prawn, or play hockey on the wide firm stretch of sand left by the retreating tide, or just sit on the rocks basking in the warm sunshine.

And if these occupations palled, there was always the Headland to walk out on to, with the sea deep down below you on either hand and the spumes of foam, like great balls of swansdown, blowing about, and the spray wetting your face so that your lips, if you licked them, were salt to the taste, while, at the end of the jutting promontory, it was possible to clamber down the shelving rocks almost to the very edge of the water where you could lie and watch the breakers thundering at your feet until it seemed as if they were some species of savage beast trying to get at and devour you.

Or there were dark mysterious caves to explore where one always felt one might come upon the body of a shipwrecked mariner who, of course, would be swarthy of complexion with gold rings in his ears and a red kerchief tightly bound round his head and fastened in a knot at the nape of the neck. His eyes would be wide open and glassy and staring and a few strands of oozy green seaweed would be mingled with the locks of coarse black hair which, escaping from the confining head-dress, hung over his cheeks, while a trickle of water would, in defiance of all the laws of nature, perpetually run out from between his hanging jaws.

To John, of course, all these things were familiar joys but he never tired of them and one of his greatest pleasures had been to act as showman to newcomers. He felt all the importance of the proprietor of a large landed estate without any of that harassed individual's responsibilities.

This first love affair of John's could hardly be described as having been of a wildly passionate nature. To begin with, it was entirely one-sided which, since John was not in the least like the strong silent man of fiction, rather discounted the possibility of any powerful love scene in the unfolding of the drama. Silent he was, it is true, but it was the silence of weakness, not strength. The presence of his beloved had a stultifying effect on him which rendered him tongue-tied. Like the unfortunate lady in "Twelfth Night" he never told his love and felt a sneaking sense of injury that he could trace no signs of the fact in his personal appearance. When he examined his features in the glass, which he did anxiously and daily, he was totally unable to diagnose the presence of any worm in the bud. Concealment had not the slightest effect on his facial contours, possibly because his appetite remained unimpaired. The nearest approach to sentiment he ever arrived at was the evening before Biddy was going home when, in the dim religious light of a cavern, he, with one of those desperate acts of presumption which a shy man sometimes achieves when driven, had attempted to kiss her. Even that, however, had not been an unqualified success with her for, at the critical moment, Biddy, no doubt reading his purpose in the determined set of his mouth, had turned her head away so that the kiss which it was intended should awaken the sleeping princess landed on the tip of her left ear, and the princess, who hadn't been asleep at all really but only pretending, said, with a certain show of temper, "Don't, John. I hate being mauled."

There had been various more articulate affairs of the heart since then. There had been a girl in the tobacconist's at Oxford and an anæmic parish worker during his first

year as a curate, and a stalwart young person with bobbed hair and a slightly over-done hail-fellow-well-met manner, and a war-widow seeking consolation and a second husband at one and the same time by the simple expedient of substituting a thick layer of grease paint for the major portion of her clothing and dancing extremely badly at Charity Matinees. It cannot be said that any of these affairs developed into a grande passion such as the hero in "Simon Called Peter" experienced. Compared to that they were pallid ghosts and never overstepped the bounds of strict decorum for a single instant, indeed it is perhaps an exaggeration to describe them as "love affairs." Rather might they be diagnosed as affections of the heart unaccompanied by any feverish symptoms. Anyhow there was none of that tickling sensation behind the top button of his waistcoat when John thought of any of the four.

It was exactly a quarter to four when John put his finger on the bell-push of Mrs. Chaworth's flat in Barrie Mansions, Kensington. He heard the faint whirr of the bezzer against the gong and then footsteps along the passage and the next minute the door was flung open by a starched maid-servant who informed him, in a disinterested voice, that her mistress was at home.

She took his hat and stick, after admitting him, as if it were a condescension on her part to touch the beastly things, inquired his name with the asperity of a sergeant on the parade ground and finally, to his secret relief, ushered him into a room on the right-hand side of the narrow hall and announced his presence in tones which plainly said that Finches was a ridiculous name to be called by but that it was no fault of hers.

From his faint recollection of his godmother he had expected to see a somewhat old-fashioned elderly lady in garments appropriate to her age with perhaps a lace cap on her white hair, instead of which an odd-looking female with a copper-coloured and obvious wig, clad in what appeared to be a cross between a gymnastic costume and

a bathing dress, advanced to meet him with outstretched hand, while another equally weird creature attired in a short skirt reaching to just above her knees and a ginger-hued jumper which followed the lines of her untrammeled figure with embarrassing fidelity, stood on the hearth rug scowling at the intruder.

"I thought it was Mrs. Rycroft," said his godmother after the first greetings during which he discovered that it *was* Mrs. Chaworth and that he had not got into the wrong flat by mistake. "Miss Bee, my godson, Mr. Ffoulkes. Miss Bee kindly superintends my exercises." The apparition on the hearth rug scowled more deeply than ever and John, taking it to be a recognition of his existence, bowed nervously in its direction.

"Well, I'll be getting," said the apparition to Mrs. Chaworth, paying no further attention to the evidently unwelcome third. "There's no use in my stopping any longer."

It strode to the door which John opened for it with a feeling of profound thankfulness.

"You've got that abdomen exercise all right now, haven't you?" it inquired peremptorily over its shoulder as it went out.

John understood that his godmother *had* got the abdomen exercise all right now.

"Right-oh," shouted the apparition in a stentorian voice from the hall as the door closed, "do it in front of your open window with no clothes on."

The last sentence came somewhat muffled but perfectly audible through the door which John had closed as hurriedly as was compatible with good manners at the mention of the word abdomen, recollecting his godmother's bated breath when she had to say "stomach," but when he went over to where she had seated herself he found her quite cool and collected, so presumably "abdomen" was a more recondite mode of expression than the other or else association with Miss Bee had broadened Mrs. Chaworth's outlook

which John thought was the more likely judging by his one brief encounter with that lady.

"How you have grown, John," his godmother observed fatuously as he took the vacant place beside her on the sofa. It semed to surprise her that he was not still in a sailor suit as he had been when they last met.

"Well, you know, it's going on for thirty years since you saw me," he said, sternly repressing his very natural desire to stare at her extraordinary get-up. The hybrid garment in conjunction with the fiery wig proved an almost irresistible attraction and he had to exercise all his self-control to keep his eyes from wandering in their direction.

It really seemed as though his thoughts communicated themselves to Mrs. Chaworth for she said abruptly:

"I don't generally appear in the drawing room in this — er — dress. I only popped in to show Miss Bee a letter in this week's copy of *Health*. Fullalove didn't know or she would have shown you into the Snuggery."

Fullalove was evidently the misnomer of the austere person who had admitted John. Remembering Miss Bee's parting injunction it relieved him to learn that Mrs. Chaworth was not in the habit of conducting her exercises in an apartment where she was liable to be interrupted by the incursion of unexpected visitors.

"I'll run and change. I shan't be ten minutes. You must amuse yourself till I come back, and if Mrs. Rycroft comes while I'm gone just explain to her and ask her to excuse me."

This speech took her to the door, as the producer of a play would say, and John heaved a sigh of relief as she vanished through it, leaving him alone to recover from the tension of the last five minutes, though he sincerely trusted she would be back before Mrs. Rycroft, who was evidently due, arrived. Whether she were an invited guest or a dressmaker or another superintendent of Mrs. Chaworth's exercises he had no idea but he fervently hoped not the latter.

While he waited he got up and standing on the hearthrug looked about him. The room resembled nothing so much as a bazaar ready for the opening ceremony.

The floor space was littered with small tables loaded with perfectly useless articles of no intrinsic value and certainly of no beauty. Mrs. Chaworth's hobby appeared to be the picking up of unconsidered trifles and John would not have given a five-pound note for the whole lot put together, indeed he would not have accepted them as a gift if they had been offered. The walls bristled with shelves and brackets each holding their complement of rubbish while as to the mantelpiece it simply, as John expressed it in his own mind, " teemed " with odds and ends. There was what, at first sight, looked like a petrified round of underdone toast with streaks of soot on it but which, on closer examination, proved to be a highly polished segment of olive tree with the words " Mount Olivet " inscribed upon its surface in black lettering. Next to this stood an ivory model of the leaning tower of Pisa about four inches high, which was flanked by one of those spiral shells that have the appearance of suffering from a severe attack of measles and in which, if you hold them to your ear, you are popularly supposed to be able to hear the sound of the sea. Against this, cheek by jowl, was a minute jug of that ware known as Silicon bearing the arms of the City of Peterboro' (why Peterboro'? John wondered) superimposed, or whatever the correct heraldic term may be, on an azure blue shield. A snake, composed of some kind of fibrous substance, reared its head with the aid of a white glass-topped pin and put out a red-flannel tongue at its neighbour, a bronze stag beetle. An Eastern tear-bottle coquetted with the cast-off shoe of a Chinese belle, who must have suffered terribly to achieve her ends, and the lion, represented by one of its claws, lay down alongside the Dresden lamb which gambolled round the remaining foot of a shepherdess of German extraction.

That was as far as John had reached in his survey when

the door was thrown open and the voice of Fullalove said "Mrs. Rycroft" in tones of strong disapproval.

John hastily fitted his face with a smile appropriate to the occasion and prepared to frame an apology for his godmother's temporary absence in suitable terms but, at sight of the figure who followed the unfamiliar name into the room he paused, the smile appropriate to the occasion died away, to be instantly replaced by a genuine one of incredulous but delighted recognition, and forgetting every word of Mrs. Chaworth's message he went forward with both hands held out.

"Biddy!" he ejaculated in a tone of voice which even plumbed the depths of the aloof Fullalove's consciousness and caused her to cast a curious look in his direction.

Mrs. Rycroft, advancing over the carpet, taken aback at hearing her Christian name issue from the lips of someone whom she had taken to be an entire stranger, arrested her progress for a bare second. The halt was only momentary for she recognised John almost immediately.

"Why, John! But how delightful and how surprising too!" she exclaimed, coming up to him and laying her two gloved hands in his outstretched palms in friendly fashion. "I didn't recognise you for a second or two."

"I recognised *you* the very second you came in," John said, half reproachfully. "It was only this afternoon I was thinking about you and those jolly days at Porth Ros when we — when I — "

"When we were both young and you were — foolish."

Biddy finished the sentence for him with the faintest suspicion of a smile playing about her mouth but in her eyes there was a look of far-away remembrance and in her cheeks the colour deepened the tiniest shade.

A feeling of something akin to exultation stole over John at the realisation that if he had not forgotten the "foolishness," neither had she, but it died away again before it had time to do more than just give him a warm glow of satisfaction at the thought. It was like passing one of those

braziers of red-hot charcoal which are sometimes to be seen outside a watchman's hut at the side of a road which is being repaired. The heat envelopes you for a brief moment and the next you are in the cold again before there is time for the warmth of it to thaw the frozen blood in your veins.

What was the earthly use of raking out dead embers in the hope of finding a spark?

Besides, everything was different now. It was twelve years since John had seen or heard anything of Biddy and a great deal can happen in twelve years. For one thing an unknown person called Rycroft had happened which rather knocked the bottom out of sentiment.

Who, and what was Rycroft, John wondered. When and where had Biddy met him? At what period during those twelve years, of which he possessed no knowledge, had this Rycroft wooed and won Biddy — Biddy, who " hated being mauled"?

He longed to blurt out all these queries, to question her point-blank, to demand from her an explanation of all the circumstances connected with the arrival of Rycroft upon the scenes, but he could hardly do so in the first five minutes of their meeting again, butting into her private affairs without any preliminaries, and yet any ordinary conversation seemed an anticlimax.

It was Biddy who broke the silence.

" They were good days, weren't they?" she said. " That's the worst of it. One doesn't always recognise good days when one sees them. One needs bad days now and then by which to set a standard. I suppose after all it's just a question of comparison."

She pulled off her gloves meditatively as she spoke and John caught sight of the plain gold band gleaming on the third finger of her left hand. He nodded his head towards it.

" You're married," he said.

Biddy followed the direction of his movement and rais-

ing her hand looked curiously at the ring on her finger almost as though she was seeing it for the first time.

"I'm a widow," she said shortly, letting her hand drop to her side again.

"Oh, I — I'm sorry," John stammered out. "I — I didn't know. I — I wouldn't have said anything if I'd known."

Biddy sat down on the sofa, putting her gloves and the little gold mesh bag she carried on the back of it, then:

"You needn't be sorry, John," she said deliberately. "Let's leave it at that, shall we?"

There was a little uncomfortable pause before she spoke again, and when she did it was on a totally different subject.

"Tell me about Porth Ros," she said. "Do you ever go there now?"

"Whenever I can. My mother and aunt still live there. I believe they'd die if they were transplanted. I can only get there for my holiday so I don't see very much of it, in fact my aunt declares I've ceased to belong to the place and classes me among the trippers. It's become a perennial joke with her to offer to take me to see the caves. She just does it to rile me."

"And does she succeed?" asked Biddy.

"I'm afraid she does," John confessed. "You see I love it all so that I simply can't stand the slightest suggestion that I and the place are not one."

"I see," said Biddy. "You like to regard Porth Ros as a sort of figurative spouse. By the way, you're not married, I suppose?"

John laughed.

"No. I'm not married," he said. "But it's hardly polite to assume the fact quite so positively."

"I'm really being frightfully complimentary," she declared. "I assumed the fact so positively, as you put it, because you look so absurdly young and fresh. Oh, I don't mean *green,*" she hastened to add, as John uttered

a sound of protest. "I mean that if you *were* married you'd have more of a married air about you."

"And what may that consist of?" enquired John.

"Oh, I don't know. One can't put those things into words. It's a sort of will-the-Missus-make-the-housekeeping-money-last-out-the-week look. A married man always acquires it unless he's so rich it doesn't matter. Are you rich, John?"

"No, I'm not," said John emphatically. "Are you?"

"Yes, I am," replied Biddy shortly. "Beastly rich."

It was at this point in the conversation that Mrs. Chaworth returned upon the scenes, properly dressed.

She kissed Biddy and sat down beside her.

"Disgraceful of me not to have been here when you arrived," she said brightly. "I hope you two introduced yourselves to one another and that John gave my message to you, Biddy?"

"What message?" asked Biddy.

"I'm afraid I clean forgot about it, Aunt Maggie," John said, addressing her by the ridiculous name he had been taught to call her in the days of childhood. "As for introducing ourselves," he went on, "we did that ages ago on the beach at Porth Ros."

"You mean, I suppose, that you were introduced," Mrs. Chaworth said, moving an amendment.

"No, I don't," John said cheerfully. "As far as I remember there was nobody else there to do it for us so we just did it for ourselves."

"*In*deed."

Had John said "We clicked on the pier at Brighton" the statement could not have been received with more obvious and sterner disapproval. If Mrs. Chaworth had been a porcupine she would, at this juncture, have stuck out her quills. Being a mere human being she had to content herself with the inflection of a single syllable.

John, in imagination, could see every hair on her head struggling to stand on end under the weight of that pre-

posterous wig. It was a curious reversion to type, he reflected. You may paint your face and tire your head. You may even look out of a window while, with nothing on, you do exercises to keep your figure down, but if you have an Early Victorian mind, it is bound, eventually, to triumph over late Georgian matter.

In Mrs. Chaworth's youth it was permissible to pick up shells and seaweed on the beach but not a chance acquaintance of the opposite sex. She knew that nowadays there was a laxity on these matters for which she blamed, in equal proportions, mixed bathing, the war, and women having the vote, but it was a thing she had never been able to accustom herself to, although she made gallant efforts to appear up-to-date and it was only when taken unawares, as on this occasion, that she gave herself away and established the fact that the twentieth-century tolerance on which she prided herself was but a thin veneer laid on the top of nineteenth-century prejudices which, in certain lights, showed through.

It was the look of astonishment in her godson's face, coupled with what sounded suspiciously like a smothered laugh from Biddy, that brought her back with a start to her rôle of an ultra-modern woman of the world which, for the moment, she had forgotten to sustain.

"I suppose you felt it was a case of 'He who will not when he may,' eh, John?" she said with ponderous playfulness, adroitly recovering her mental balance.

"Something like that, Aunt Maggie," John answered lamely.

"And you never met again until you met this afternoon in my drawing room," exclaimed Mrs. Chaworth dramatically. She was given to investing the most commonplace happenings of daily life with a halo of romance which John felt was, in this case, sailing rather too near the wind for his liking.

It was Biddy who saved the situation.

"On the contrary. We met constantly. My mother had

a furnished house for the summer so we were practically next door to one another. Mrs. Ffoulkes kindly called on my mother," she said in calm even tones.

"Oh! Then it was years ago. Before the war," said Mrs. Chaworth. "Why, you must both of you have been mere children. You were married in 1912, Biddy, on St. Valentine's day. I remember thinking it such a romantic date."

"Terribly romantic, wasn't it?" There was a note of harshness in Biddy's voice which did not escape John's notice and he speculated within himself as to what lay behind it all. That her marriage had not been altogether a success was evident. He had gathered that much from her way of saying "You needn't be sorry, John," when he had expressed his sorrow at hearing she was left a widow.

"But then it was all so romantic," babbled on Mrs. Chaworth.

"Colonel Rycroft was the V. C., you know, John, and a great friend of your Uncle Henry's."

Uncle Henry was Mrs. Chaworth's late husband and a mythological character as far as John was concerned, having died several years before the latter's birth.

It was a little difficult to discover whether the romance was due to the V. C. or the friendship to Uncle Henry or a mixture of the two. John threw a hurried glance at a portrait hanging over his godmother's escritoire and decided that, if it was a representation of Uncle Henry as he supposed, the romance did not lie in that direction.

Uncle Henry, if the artist had portrayed him faithfully, which John saw no reason to doubt, had been a stout, florid individual with a luxuriant growth of brown whisker and a beard flowing half-way down his white waistcoat. A watch chain, composed of massive gold links, kept him, as it appeared, from bursting bounds. He stood beside a table and with one podgy hand restrained the impetuosity of a large volume lying at the corner of it while the small portion of face which was unimpeded with hair exuded a

self-satisfied complacency. Judging by external evidence there were certainly no grounds for connecting romance and Uncle Henry so it must be to do with the V. C., John decided.

No doubt Mrs. Chaworth, regardless of Biddy's very obvious desire not to pursue the subject, would have gone on to explain in detail the reasons why romance was so specially associated with this particular marriage, she being one of those women who worry a sentiment as a terrier worries a rat, but happily the arrival of tea at this moment caused a diversion and the talk drifted into other channels.

At half-past five Biddy got up to go.

"Couldn't you come back and dine, John?" she said, ignoring the hand he held out. "We've such heaps to tell one another. You don't mind my dragging him away, Margaret?"

She seemed to take it for granted that he would not refuse and indeed he had no wish to do so but he glanced down at his clothes doubtfully.

"I'm not dressed, Biddy," he said.

"As if that matters," she returned impatiently. "You surely aren't going to make that an excuse? Good heavens, if you only knew how sick I am of immaculately dressed young men! For all I care you'd be welcome to sit down to dinner in Porth kit, only I suppose, if you did, my butler would give notice."

"What is — er — 'Porth kit'?" enquired Mrs. Chaworth with pardonable curiosity.

"Porth kit, my dear Margaret, is a combination of the least possible amount of clothing with the greatest possible amount of *savoir faire*. It consists of shorts, shirt and sand-shoes," Biddy told her.

"But John couldn't go about in London with nothing more on than that," protested John's godmother, labouring the point. For one awful second it seemed as if the words "it wouldn't be nice" were hovering on her lips, in which case John would inevitably have disgraced himself by laugh-

ing. Luckily Mrs. Chaworth remembered her pose of woman of the world in time to check further comment and allowed them to make their adieux without alluding to the subject again.

Outside the door of the Mansions a car was standing which, even to John's unpracticed eye, appeared the last word in luxurious comfort, and, as they emerged, the chauffeur, after a rapid touch to the peak of his cap, flung open the door.

Biddy got in followed by John and the man arranged the rug over their knees and awaited his orders.

"Home, Rands, please," Biddy said.

The man shut the door, climbed into his seat, and the car glided off.

CHAPTER III

"Well. Out with them, John," Biddy said.

"Out with what?" John enquired.

"With all those questions that have been itching to come out for the last hour and a half."

"How do you know that?"

"My dear John! Don't be foolish. The last time we met, twelve years ago (twelve years is quite a big slice out of one's life, John), I was a gawky schoolgirl with my hair hanging down my back and about as much knowledge of life as a kitten with its eyes just open. Since then the books have been put into my hands, John, and I've read them and I've found it's true that he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow also. I've not enjoyed my lessons. I never did learn easily."

"Lessons are always harder when one doesn't want to learn," John said. "The war was a cruel schoolmaster, but it taught us a lot, because it forced us to pay attention and wouldn't let us scamp things."

Biddy's hands, lying loosely on the outside of the rug which covered their knees, suddenly clenched.

"The war! What did the war do for me — except make me stand in the corner with my face to the wall? The war taught me nothing!" Biddy exclaimed with an undercurrent of bitterness in her voice which John was quick to detect.

"One sometimes learns things by standing in the corner with one's face to the wall," he said gently.

"What things?" she demanded fiercely.

"Discipline."

"Or rebellion. That's the antithesis of discipline, isn't it? Yours is the parson's point of view, John." Biddy gave a little quick sigh. "Oh, dear! *How* we've both changed in these twelve years."

John shook his head.

"You haven't changed as much as you think you have, Biddy," he said.

"But don't let us go on talking abstracts. I want to know facts. We were rather good pals in those old days. Couldn't you — trust me?"

"I'm a beast," Biddy said impulsively. "I'm sorry if I seemed to sneer at you for living up to your profession. I didn't mean it that way. I can give you the history of all that's happened to me since we last saw one another, only without footnotes I'm afraid,— at any rate for the present."

"I don't like footnotes, anyway," John said. "They confound the issue."

"Well then, if I seem to pass some rather harsh judgments you won't on that account judge *me* harshly, will you? You see, I can only speak of things from my own point of view and it's quite possible my vision may be defective. My mother — " She broke off hurriedly and went off at a tangent, "John couldn't you just *ask* me the things you wanted to know and let me answer them?"

"Would it be easier, Biddy?" John asked.

"Yes, I think it would," Biddy confessed.

"Right-oh," John said. "Well, Biddy, first of all, what about your mother?"

"Mother died in 1916. Poor darling, she was fifty-one but she would insist on working at an all-night canteen and wearing herself out. She got pneumonia and simply hadn't the strength to make a fight for life."

"Anyhow she died at her post, Biddy. I don't know that a death like that is the worst thing life has to offer," John said.

"I'm sure it isn't," declared Biddy vehemently. "At least one dies in the open and not with one's face to the wall."

"And you, Biddy. What about you?"

"That's too general a question, John. What do you want to know about me?"

"About *this* mostly." He touched her glove on that part of it which concealed her wedding ring.

"That was really question one, wasn't it? I saw it in your eyes when that silly woman (I beg your pardon, John. I forgot she was your godmother), when Mrs. Chaworth, then, was meandering on about it being a 'romance.' There wasn't much romance about it, unless to marry a man forty years older than yourself is romantic."

"*Forty* years older!" In spite of himself John could not help letting his astonishment show itself.

"I was nineteen, John. People have no business to allow girls of nineteen to get married. How can they know? How *can* they know, if they've never been taught? Oh, I'll own it seemed romantic at the time. I met Colonel Rycroft at a house in the country where I was staying and I suppose I felt flattered when he singled me out for attention. It made me thrill when we were out anywhere together and I saw people nudging one another. I knew they were saying 'Look! That's Rycroft, the V. C., you know.' And when he asked me to marry him I only thought how wonderful it was that he should have chosen *me* out of all the girls who would have jumped at the chance. I never thought of what marriage really meant, or of the difference in our ages. Spiteful people said that I was marrying him for his money. He was very well off, you see. But it wasn't that. The money part never entered my head."

"I know it never would," John said soothingly.

"Well, we were married in the following February — on the 'romantic' date you've heard such a lot about from Margaret, and — we didn't live happily ever after. My house of dreams was soon shattered — my house of dreams built on his reputation. I had forgotten he was a man as well as a soldier and that he might have another reputation besides his military one. I was soon undeceived. There were plenty to see to that. To do him justice, I believe he was what is called 'faithful' to me, but the past was taken

from me and, though I suppose it's silly and too much to expect, I think a man's past belongs to his wife as much as a woman's to her husband."

"Will you forgive me if I say something that sounds impertinent?" John asked. "It isn't intended to be."

"Why, of course! I trust you, John. If I didn't I should hardly have told you the things that I have, should I? You're a privileged person," Biddy answered. "What is it you want to say?"

"Well then, I think, you know, that your 'house of dreams' was built on sand if you'll forgive my saying so. The wind blew and it toppled over at once. If it had been built on rock there might have been some windows blown in but the foundations would have stood. Perhaps you'll say, as you did before, that I'm looking at it from the parson's point of view, but it's the right one, Biddy."

"By 'rock' you mean — what exactly?"

"I mean love. Not the blind love which sees no fault because it lacks the power of vision, but the love which sees clearly and forgives because it *is* love."

"Forgives even the faults against itself?"

"That's a hard saying, John," Biddy said, with a little tremour in her voice. "We're only human beings when all's said and done."

"But love's divine," John said softly.

"Then does love, the love you talk of, condone the past?"

"There *is* no past in love," insisted John. "If it's the genuine article it starts with a clean slate. It just takes a wet sponge and rubs out all the old marks."

"But supposing the slate doesn't stay — clean?"

"Then you have to wash it again,— up to seventy times seven if necessary," said John cheerfully. "But if that's likely to happen it's as well to keep a wet sponge handy."

In spite of her efforts to keep it back a little smile of amusement spread over Biddy's face.

"What's the joke?" asked John.

"I was thinking how I always hated washing up. Do

you remember at our picnics? It was invariably 'you wash, I'll wipe' with me. I suppose, even in those days, I was, unconsciously, a type," she said ruefully.

John laughed.

"One of these days, Biddy, you'll enjoy it,—if there's anything to wash, that's to say," he added.

There was a pause in the conversation after this remark and he wondered whether he had offended her, but at the end of a few minutes' silence she spoke again.

"And all this time we've been talking about me and my affairs and I haven't heard a word about you. Tell me."

So John told her what there was to tell, which wasn't a great deal, and presently the car drew up opposite the door of a house in one of the streets just off Park Lane.

"Here we are," Biddy said.

The chauffeur ran up the steps and rang the bell and almost before his finger was off it the door opened and a butler appeared.

"Mr. Ffoulkes will be dining, Barnby," Biddy said to the man, when she and John had got out of the car and passed into the hall.

"Very good, Madame," Barnby said, taking John's hat and stick out of his hands. "Then am I to understand that there will be four extra to dinner instead of three?"

"Four, Barnby?"

"I understood from Miss Bellamy (Barnby apparently always either understood things or wished to know whether he was to understand them) that Mrs. Panter, Sir Charles Saunders, and Mr. Franklin were dining tonight at seven-thirty and that the party was proceeding afterwards to the theatre."

"Bother!" said Biddy, "I clean forgot. What a beastly nuisance!"

"It's all right, Biddy, Don't worry about me," John said. "I'll sheer off."

"You'll do nothing of the kind," Biddy ordered. "See

there's a room ready for Mr. Ffoulkes to wash his hands and show him where it is when the dressing gong rings," she went on, turning to Barnby.

"Very good, Madame."

"Come along upstairs and see Belle," she said, moving towards the staircase which was through an archway at the back of the square hall.

"Who exactly is Belle?" enquired John, as he followed Biddy up the broad flight of shallow stairs. It sounded ominously like a Pekinese he thought but he could not imagine Biddy as the possessor of a Pekinese. Or could it be there was a child? It had never occurred to him that such might be the case, though what more natural when you came to consider. Of course that was it.

Biddy did not appear to hear his question and John did not repeat it for he made so sure his last idea was the correct one that it did not seem worth while to do so.

It was therefore with something almost approaching a shock that he discovered "Belle" to be a middle-aged woman with gray hair and a red face instead of a small girl with golden curls and pink and white cheeks.

She was dressed quite plainly in a gown of some dark material and at first sight gave the impression of being just an ordinary humdrum spinster of mature years with nothing remarkable or distinctive about her, but when she came forward to greet him, in response to Biddy's casual introduction which simply consisted of the words "I've brought John back with me, Belle" and he felt the steady clear brown eyes fixed on his as though trying to pierce the mask of convention and see what manner of man it hid, John realised the force behind the quiet exterior which at once lifted her out of the category of the commonplace and ordinary and put her in a class apart. Her examination of John appeared to be satisfactory for when it was completed she held out her hand to him with a friendly little smile.

"How do you do," she said, nodding, "and would you

mind telling me your name? I can't very well start off by calling you John, can I?"

"But of course you know one another," exclaimed Biddy. "Didn't you meet at Porth Ros? Oh, of course not. How silly of me. It was in the holidays wasn't it, so you weren't there, Belle. John, this is Miss Bellamy who assisted in the guidance of my careless footsteps in the slippery paths of youth. This is Mr. Ffoulkes, Belle, who taught me to swim, so you have much in common. You'll be able to compare notes."

"So now we know the worst of one another, Mr. Ffoulkes," said Miss Bellamy, with a twinkle in her eye which very nearly amounted to a wink, "come and sit down and let us unburden ourselves."

"You can do that when I go to dress," Biddy said. "*Are* Carrie and Charles and Reggie Franklin dining here tonight, Belle? Barnby says so."

"My dear Biddy, you asked them and they accepted, so I imagine they are," replied Miss Bellamy, picking up her knitting which lay on a table beside her chair.

"Drat 'em," said Biddy inelegantly.

"You always were the soul of hospitality, dearest," murmured Miss Bellamy, spreading her work on her lap and examining it critically.

"I — I'll shake you in a minute, Belle," Biddy said with emphasis. "You can't even be decently sympathetic. Here's John whom I haven't seen for years and years and the very first time we do meet a crowd of dull people barges in and spoils it all. It's too bad."

"I've heard a good many things said about Mrs. Panter but I can't recollect that dullness was ever a charge levelled against her," observed Miss Bellamy dryly.

"Oh, don't cavil, Belle," said Biddy impatiently. "You know quite well what I mean. Do put away that beastly knitting and be intelligent."

"Once, Biddy, when you were a little girl," said Miss Bellamy, knitting on imperturbably, "I found you with a

pot of caviare purloined from the sideboard. You were busily engaged in spreading some of the contents on a slice of bread and jam to whet your appetite. I didn't interfere because I was, and still am, a firm believer in the efficacy of a lesson taught by experience. You ate the filthy compound with the results I had anticipated and that was your last attempt at gastronomic research."

"I remember. I was sick," Biddy said with a grimace.

"You were," said Miss Bellamy grimly.

"But what on earth has that got to do with Carrie and the others dining here tonight?"

"It has to do with the fact that you learned your lesson so thoroughly that the mere thought of a mixture of jam and caviare still makes you feel sick."

"I'm sure you're being frightfully clever, dear, but I haven't a notion what you're driving at," Biddy said. "Have you, John?"

"I've a sort of idea," John answered.

"Do explain, then."

"I suppose what Miss Bellamy is trying to point out,—— "

("*Trying*, you'll notice, darling," interpolated Biddy flippantly.)

"—— is that I represent the jam while your other guests are the caviare, or vice-versa."

"I see. You two ought to get on well with one another. You both seem fond of talking in parables. Personally, Belle, I think you're being rather offensive. These horrid details of my infantile ailments and their causes, which you appear to take such a delight in raking up, can't possibly interest John. What a loathsome child I must have been."

"You were rather," said Miss Bellamy calmly. "However, I did wonders with the most unpromising material to work on."

"So that's it, is it? You're simply trying to glorify yourself at my expense. If you ask me, I think it's marvelous

how I've succeeded in effacing the defects of my upbringing," Biddy exclaimed haughtily. "No, dear, the subject's closed," as Miss Bellamy was about to retort. "Don't let us refer to it again. I forgave you long ago. Heavens! It's half-past six. I must go and dress for the caviare, so you and John can unburden yourselves. Goodbye for the present."

When Biddy had gone John came and sat down near Miss Bellamy, drawing up a chair to the other side of the small table which stood at her elbow. He was conscious, as he did so, that once more that penetrating gaze was fixed upon him but this time it had none of that critical aloofness which he had noticed on the previous occasion. It seemed rather as though she were waiting to receive his confidences and, in turn, to confide in him, and he had a sudden intuition that this woman whom, half an hour ago he had never even seen, never even heard of, to the best of his recollection, was an ally who invited his aid against some unknown danger which threatened.

"You've not seen Biddy for a long time?" she asked when he was seated.

"Not for twelve years," John answered.

Miss Bellamy nodded.

"Not since she married, then?" she said.

"No. Not since she married."

Miss Bellamy nodded again.

"You never knew Colonel Rycroft, then?" was her next question.

"Never even heard of him till today. You did, I suppose, know him?"

"I did," she remarked grimly.

"What was he like?" John asked.

"Do you mean mentally, morally or physically?"

"Generally speaking."

"Generally speaking, he was forty years older than Biddy," Miss Bellamy observed.

"She told me that," John said, then paused uncertainly.

He was not sure that it was quite playing the game to repeat what Biddy had told him. Miss Bellamy however saved him the trouble of coming to a decision on this point for she went on with the sentence he had broken off almost in the very words he had on the tip of his tongue.

"That it was his V. C. which attracted her. So it did. It assumed the proportions of a halo in her eyes and dazzled her so that she saw nothing else. It was like a person going along a dark country lane and meeting a car with its headlights on. Unfortunately the hot blood of youth which spurred him on to save a comrade's life concentrated during the latter years of his existence in his big toe in the form of gout. It was a pathetic anti-climax, but, to be perfectly candid, I always thought him rather an unpleasant old gentleman and his past, apart from that one heroic episode, hardly bore investigation. He died the February before the Armistice, quite unreasonably blaming poor Biddy because the War Office steadily refused to recognise his repeated offers of help at G. H. Q. and turned a deaf ear to the advice which he poured in. By that time I'm afraid the halo was burning very dim."

"But she's happy now?"

Miss Bellamy gave a little sigh.

"I wonder," she said. "She seems to me restless and dissatisfied. Mr. Ffoulkes, between you and me, I hate that Panter woman and her set. I always feel as though an H had got dropped out of her name and that it must originally have been Panther. She's really not unlike a panther. She's graceful and fascinating and, in a way of her own, attractive, but behind it all there's something cruel and merciless, something repellent. She gives me the impression of being absolutely devoid of pity, and I can't imagine her allowing any finer feelings to stand in the way of her gaining her ends. I dare say you're thinking I'm just a catty old woman running down my own sex, but I'm fond of Biddy, Mr. Ffoulkes, and — I don't want her to make another mistake."

"Is there any danger of her doing that?" John asked, a little startled.

Miss Bellamy jabbed the needles through her knitting, and rolling up the work put it on the table between them. Then she turned to John.

"Biddy is a very rich woman, Mr. Ffoulkes," she said earnestly, "and the Panter woman has an impecunious brother. I feel I'm talking in the language of cheap melodrama but I *must* if I'm to make you see things as I see them. My anecdote of the caviare on bread was more than an idle reminiscence. I'm more glad than I can say that Biddy happened to come across you again today."

"I suppose I ought to feel flattered," John said rather glumly. "All the same, I don't know if it's exactly a compliment to be regarded simply in the light of one of the compounds of an emetic, even if it's only a moral one."

"It isn't meant to be a compliment. I'm dealing with facts," Miss Bellamy said resolutely. "When Biddy married Colonel Rycroft she found herself in a new strange world with none of the familiar landmarks round her, and it wasn't to be wondered at if she lost her bearings. She's like a child who has wakened up frightened after a nightmare and who, still half asleep, cannot distinguish between dream and reality. I want to get her back among the old landmarks of which you are one, Mr. Ffoulkes."

"What I can't understand," John said, "is why her mother didn't interfere about her marrying a man old enough to be her father. Surely she couldn't have approved?"

Miss Bellamy gave an impatient twitch of the shoulders.

"Mrs. Mercer was one of those silly doting mothers who, if her child cried for the moon, would send up post haste to Harrod's for one to be sent immediately by return. Add to that the fact that she never saw an inch beyond her nose and had about as much imagination as an unintelligent cow and it doesn't leave any room for surprise that she saw nothing amiss in such a marriage," she said.

"And yet she killed herself with war work. At least, that's what Biddy told me."

"To die of pneumonia is not a sign of intelligence," said Miss Bellamy tartly. "Please don't think I'm belittling her in regard to that," she went on more gently. "On the contrary I admire her more than words can say for what she did, for her whole-hearted service, her patriotism, her dogged perseverance, her refusal to give in when her health threatened to interfere with her duty, as she conceived it, to those who were fighting her battles. She died, as much a victim of the war as any soldier in the trenches, but it doesn't alter facts."

"Well, what do you want me to do? I don't quite understand," John said.

"I don't want you to do anything except act as a landmark. Don't let these people whom you're going to meet tonight put you off. Stand by, that's all I ask."

"Is the — er — impecunious brother one of them?" John enquired with some curiosity.

"He is," returned Miss Bellamy. "That's why I was delighted to hear Biddy 'dratting' them, though it's an expression I should never have allowed her to use in the days when I was responsible for the purity of her diction."

"Were you delighted? I can't remember that you showed it particularly."

"Possibly not. I've become positively Machiavellian in my old age, Mr. Ffoulkes."

"Tell me another thing. Do you live here?" John asked.

Miss Bellamy informed him that that was so.

"Always?" he persisted.

"I came back to Biddy when she was left a widow and I've been with her ever since. Mercy on us! You aren't, I hope, hinting that I'm actuated by any selfish motives in what I've been saying?"

"Of course I'm not," John reassured her. "I was only thinking that you must have a lot of influence with Biddy and wondering why you should find it necessary to call in a

consultant. You were her governess, were you not? Aren't you a landmark?"

"It's just because I *was* Biddy's governess that I feel that I need to be specially careful in my actions now," Miss Bellamy said. "She's rising thirty and a widow. She'd resent it, and quite naturally, too, if I treated her as if she were still a little girl and my pupil. I should do more harm than good by open criticism, so I hold my tongue and say nothing, though it's pain and grief to me."

"I notice, however, that you don't deny yourself the solace of an occasional innuendo," observed John.

"I'm only a poor weak woman," said Miss Bellamy pathetically. "You surely wouldn't be so brutal as to deprive me of what little comfort I can get? In the old days, when you had a rush of blood to the head you sent, I believe, for the chirurgeon and he cupped you. I can't very well send for Dr. Neame (he's my chirurgeon) every time Mrs. Panter's name is mentioned and ask him to cup me. For one thing he wouldn't understand, and, for another, cupping has gone out of fashion. So I employ my own remedies to obtain relief."

"What should you consider the chief characteristic of a landmark?" enquired John.

"Immobility," said Miss Bellamy decidedly. "My dear good man, I'm not asking you to strike attitudes in the middle of the drawing-room carpet and announce your intention of rescuing the innocent village maiden from the machinations of the villain. I've no reason to suppose that Mr. Franklin is hatching a plot to abduct Biddy forcibly, nor do I look upon Mrs. Panter as a modern Lucretia Borgia who carries daggers and packets of poison concealed on her person for the despatch of those who thwart her plans. All I want is to introduce a fresh element into Biddy's life and make her realise that the simple things are the natural ones and that it's in her power to get back to them. Otherwise I'm so afraid she may lose her sense of proportion and develop a kind of moral astigmatism which

will obscure her powers of vision, and, once that happens, the rest will follow as a matter of course. Don't, because I talk like this, run away with the idea that I'm one of those tiresome people who hold an opinion that the world arrived at its zenith with their generation and has steadily declined with each succeeding one. I'm not. There's a lot of prattle just now about the deterioration of the human race but it's all nonsense. If you stir up the mud at the bottom of a pond with a stick it naturally rises to the surface and pollutes the water but nobody but a fool would argue from that that there was more mud in the pond than before. Give it time and it sinks to the bottom again and the water is as clear as it ever was. That's what is wrong with the world today. It's been stirred up with a bigger stick than usual so there's a corresponding increase in the amount of slime floating on the surface. It's no good trying to push it down. You only dirty your hands to no purpose. You've got to wait for it to settle."

"You're a philosopher," John said.

"Philosophy is only applied common-sense," retorted Miss Bellamy.

"Well, it's done me good to get Mrs. Panter off my chest, metaphorically speaking. I feel more kindly towards her than I've done for a long time. I've relieved the blood pressure. I must follow Biddy's example now and go and dress."

She got up as she finished talking and moved towards the door with John in her wake ready to open it for her.

"I feel an awful tramp in these clothes," he said as he turned the handle. "Biddy insisted on my staying."

Miss Bellamy eyed him critically.

"If anybody lives the simple life it is a tramp," she observed as she went out.

CHAPTER IV

JOHN, Biddy and Miss Bellamy were already assembled in the drawing room when, a few minutes before half-past seven, Mrs. Panter arrived upon the scenes with her brother and Sir Charles Saunders in tow. John looked at her with curiosity as she came into the room, and immediately decided that, outside a film drama, he had never seen anybody quite so like the type of female commonly known in the cinema world as a "vampire." In fact she was such a faithful copy of one that he was forced to the conclusion that the resemblance was due to plagiarism and not accident.

She was slightly below medium height with shiny black hair strained back from her forehead and done in a loose knot behind from which rose a high tortoise-shell comb of Spanish workmanship, while from her ears depended long gold filigree earrings which, at each movement of her head, struck her such violent blows on the neck that it was quite surprising they didn't leave large bruises. Her face was thickly covered with some white preparation which gave her the appearance of having just come round after a severe attack of fainting, and out of this chalky expanse glimmered two little beady eyes, while a red gash across the lower part of it served to indicate the position of her mouth. She seemed to affect the products of Spain, for her dress, what there was of it, consisted of a black Spanish shawl of some silky material with brilliant scarlet flowers worked upon it and a border of fringe, wrapped tightly round her and fastened on the hip with a diamond brooch in the form of a dagger, to which John drew Miss Bellamy's attention with his eyes, a proceeding which had the result of making her greet Mrs. Panter with a broad smile, instead of the hauteur which she habitually displayed towards that lady.

Sir Charles Saunders, who followed Mrs. Panter into the room, had the appearance of such extreme youth that John found himself idly wondering how it was that he was not at school in term time. He had fair hair very carefully kept in place by the application of some sticky compound, and his upper lip faintly displayed a golden down which he anxiously felt at intervals to make sure there was no deception about it and that it was not mere imagination on his part. He was faultlessly dressed, but a trifle too conscious of the fact.

Mrs. Panter's brother, the last of the three new-comers, was very like his sister. He had the same glossy black hair, brushed straight back from the forehead, the same beady eyes, the same thin slit of a mouth. The chief difference between them lay in the complexion, for his skin was a sort of indeterminate hue, hovering on the borders of lemon colour and light mud. One instinctively felt, looking at him, how wise Mrs. Panter was to apply white-wash and cover deficiencies.

He, too, like Sir Charles, was well turned out but, unlike him, carried his clothes with the air of one who hardly knows what he is wearing, but is confident that his man has seen to it that every detail is correct for the particular occasion. When one lives in bachelor chambers and shares the services of a harassed and incompetent youth of eighteen with half a dozen fellow-sufferers it is a great social asset to imply tacitly that one possesses a competent valet of one's very own.

During the introductions that followed John was perfectly aware that Mrs. Panter, her brother, and the youthful baronet were taking stock of him, each trying to fit him in and finding a difficulty in so doing. He quite appreciated the difficulty for to sally forth arrayed in purple and fine linen and find, on arrival, another unexpected guest in the shape of a parson in a rather dusty gray lounge suit would naturally prove somewhat disconcerting.

Mrs. Panter, who distrusted all clergymen on principle,

and unknown ones in particular, bowed tentatively. The youthful baronet shook hands with an assumption of heartiness which deceived nobody, and Mr. Franklin nodded and said "how-de-do" in tones which plainly inferred that John's well-being or otherwise was a matter of complete indifference to him one way or the other.

There was the usual awkward pause after the introductions were effected, broken by Biddy who said, "Mr. Ffoulkes is an old friend of mine" in an unconvincing voice, to which Mrs. Panter replied, "How interesting," and fixed a beady stare on John's boots as though she considered he was exceeding the latitude permitted to the very oldest friendship by proposing to sit down to dinner in them.

"I know. Frightful, aren't they?" John observed, thereby successfully spiking the enemy's guns. Mrs. Panter was unaccustomed to people who openly drew attention to any silent ridicule she chose to administer and it rather shook her morale, a fact which John noted with inward satisfaction. She began to wonder if she had been quite right in her first estimate of him as a person of no account and hastily reconsidered her line of conduct. She decided that a little light badinage would not be amiss under the circumstances. It would not commit her in any way and badinage could so easily be turned into baiting if subsequent events warranted the change of front, or the two could even be combined and a snub administered in the form of a pleasantry. It would perhaps teach this uncouth young man that he could not measure weapons with her with impunity, so,

"If you don't mind them, why should I?" she said, smiling sweetly but with a glitter in her eye which neutralised the smile. "Old friends have privileges which are denied less favoured mortals, haven't they? It must be so nice to be given the freedom of anybody else's house and feel one needn't keep up appearances. I suppose you're taking what they call pot-luck? So brave, in the middle of the season!

But I dare say you only recognise the ecclesiastical seasons. So clever to remember them, I always think."

At this juncture Barnby arrived on the scene to announce that dinner was served, and Mrs. Panter was perforce obliged to postpone any further remarks to a future occasion, which relieved everybody except herself.

John, at Biddy's behest, offered his arm to the lady who condescended to place the tips of her fingers within it.

If she intended to make him feel uncomfortable by her "badinage" she signally failed in her purpose for he remained quite unmoved; indeed, he was, if anything, rather pleased that, at their first encounter, he had drawn blood.

Down in the dining room there was a slight delay while they were being marshaled to their places.

John, to his content, found himself at the foot of the table, facing Biddy, with Mrs. Panter on his right hand and Miss Bellamy on his left. Beyond Mrs. Panter sat Sir Charles, and Mr. Franklin was between his hostess and Miss Bellamy.

John's content lay in the fact that it was he whom Biddy had chosen to occupy the seat, if not to perform the functions, of host, in preference to either of the other two men. It defined his position at once and gave him a comfortable sense of superiority over them.

"What are we seeing tonight, Biddy?" enquired Mrs. Panter, helping herself to hors d'œuvre from the selection which the footman handed to her.

"'Loyalties,'" Biddy said, "I hope none of you have seen it?"

"I have, but it doesn't matter in the least," observed Mrs. Panter. "One only goes to the theatre to fill in the period of boredom between dinner and dancing."

"Art for art's sake!" said Miss Bellamy from opposite. "I understand now what a patron of the drama is."

"What is it, then?" asked John.

"One who patronizes it, of course. I should have thought

you'd have appreciated that fact, Mr. Ffoulkes, considering that nine people out of every ten attend a church service in the same spirit."

"No," protested John quickly.

"Perhaps not in your parts," Miss Bellamy returned. "I was thinking more of the fashionable West End church, where the congregation, when invited to 'kneel before the Lord its Maker' replies in deed, if not in words, 'I can't. I should spoil my clothes.'"

John shook his head.

"It's all rot to single any special class for condemnation," he said.

"Then you really think a duke is as good as a dustman?" enquired Mr. Franklin condescendingly.

"I think that a duke is no better or no worse than a dustman in as far as they are both human beings," John retorted. "Believe me, if you will only take the trouble to dig a little way below the surface you'll find very little difference. A duke is nothing but a veneered dustman. Do you suppose for a single instant that it is innate virtue which prevents the so-called upper classes from behaving in a precisely similar fashion to the lower? Of course it isn't! Catch a duke and starve him for two or three days, then put him inside a baker's shop with a tray of loaves and nobody to keep an eye on him, and see if he doesn't nick one."

"It sounds a good recipe. What a pity it's not practicable," remarked Mr. Franklin tolerantly.

"And what a headline for the papers that cater for the masses," put in his sister. "'Duke steals loaf.' Why, it would sell like hot cakes!"

"That's exactly it!" exclaimed John eagerly. "It's the thought of that headline which prevents many a man from doing wrong. People profess to sneer at Mrs. Grundy but she's still a power in the land, thank goodness."

"Mind you make a hearty meal, Charles, my lad," Mr. Franklin exhorted his opposite neighbour. "We've not got

a duke among us but we have got a bold bad Baronite, so we aren't taking any risks."

Biddy smiled down the table at John.

"Heavens, John!" she said. "What a sermon! And the text is?"

"I love Mrs. Grundy, her coat is so warm

"And if I don't hurt her she'll do me *no* harm,"

mis-quoted Mrs. Panter in a sing-song voice, at which everyone laughed except John, who got rather red and said, "Sorry, Biddy, I didn't mean to preach."

He was furious with himself for not concealing his discomfiture better and for allowing Mrs. Panter to get under his guard. His antagonist, on the other hand, was so delighted at having pinked him that she forgot all her former rancour and became almost friendly.

"But I think it's so delightful," she said rallyingly. "I shall certainly come and hear you in the pulpit one of these days. Where is the pulpit, by the way?"

"In the far East," John told her, pulling himself together.

"How disappointing," Mrs. Panter said. "I'm afraid it's a case of 'East is East' as somebody or other says. I forget who, for the minute."

"Really, Carrie, your ignorance is colossal," observed Sir Charles, in a high squeaky voice. "Even I know which merchant delivered those goods."

Mrs. Panter surveyed him dispassionately.

"Quite likely, dear child. You're last from school," she remarked. "All the same you seem to be ignorant of the excellent maxim which says something about children being seen but not heard."

"I am. I wasn't brought up on excellent maxims. Times change, you know," Sir Charles answered back pertly.

"You — you little viper!" ejaculated Mrs. Panter with vehemence.

"I deny it in toto," piped Sir Charles shrilly. "You never nourished me in your bosom."

"How you wrangle, Charles," Biddy said hurriedly.

"Yes," said Mrs. Panter, "Mr. Ffoulkes will go back with the most dreadful opinion of us all. I'm sure they never talk in the terrible way you do at mothers' meetings and girls' clubs and places of that sort, do they, Mr. Ffoulkes?"

"Never, Mrs. Panter," John assured her gravely. "A mothers' meeting is the very acme of respectability. You should just hear their ideas of life in the wild and woolly West, culled, for the most part, from the reports of divorce court proceedings. One lady of my acquaintance talks shudderingly of 'wickedness in high places,' and my landlady has a rooted conviction that I visit the purlieus of Grosvenor Square in a strictly missionary spirit. She always watches my departure with deep misgiving and welcomes me back with open arms, as one who has escaped from many and great dangers."

"She's a far-seeing woman," Miss Bellamy remarked dryly.

. . . . . .

"We'll have coffee here, Barnby," Biddy said, when the meal was finished and the dessert put on the table.

"Very good, Madame," replied Barnby, placing a silver box full of cigarettes and small lighter at her elbow.

"Help yourselves," Biddy said, taking a cigarette and pushing the box in Sir Charles' direction.

"Are they gaspers?" enquired that youth, peering into the box.

"Don't pretend you were in the war, Charles," observed Mrs. Panter disdainfully. "It's such bad form when everybody knows by merely looking at you that it's outside the bounds of possibility."

Sir Charles made an effort to get a firm grip of his incipient moustache but slipped off it again.

"I don't know why you're always chipping me about my age," he said resentfully.

"Did you say — age, my little man?" asked Mrs. Panter solicitously.

"There you go again. I can't help it if I wasn't born in a vintage year. Cigarette?"

"Thanks. I prefer my own," Mrs. Panter said, producing a gold case from a bag. She extracted a cigarette therefrom and lit it at the lighter which Sir Charles held for her.

"Do I shock you?" she enquired of Miss Bellamy a trifle maliciously.

"Not in the least," was the calm rejoinder. "I learned, during the war, to be shocked at nothing. I'm sorry if I disappoint you."

Mrs. Panter shrugged her shoulders.

"It really doesn't matter to me one way or the other," she said with studied insolence.

"I wish you were coming with us, John," Biddy remarked in order to lead the conversation round to other topics. She was a little tired of this demon of bickering which seemed to have taken possession of her dear friend, Carrie Panter.

"Does Mr. Ffoulkes disapprove of theatres or does his landlady forbid them?" asked Reggie Franklin, with a supercilious glance at John's clothes which was not lost upon the owner of them.

"My heart's willing but my feet won't let me," John said, ignoring the other man's remark and addressing himself to Biddy. "I'm painfully aware of their shortcomings. The look Mrs. Panter gave them before dinner was like a visit to a chiropodist. It cut me to the quick."

Mrs. Panter, mellowed by the good food and excellent wine which had been provided for her delectation, went to the length of tapping her late adversary smartly on the arm.

"You horrid man, raking up the past," she said archly (at least John supposed it was intended for archness), then, catching sight of a grim smile of amusement on Miss Bellamy's face, suddenly stiffened. Because she relaxed towards John, it didn't follow that she did so to Miss Bellamy. The former, even though a parson, was a man,

while the latter was just one of her own sex, and an unimportant one at that. The former was kneadable, while to attempt to knead the latter would, in all probability, result in broken knuckles. Mrs. Panter never wasted her sweetness on the desert air. She found some difficulty in "placing" John, of whose existence, until this evening, she had been unaware. If he were such an old friend of Biddy's why had she never mentioned him and how did it come to pass that he was here without any warning, taking the head of the table and being treated as somebody of importance? Biddy had been speaking to her over the telephone at lunch time and had said no word about expecting him which she would have done if such had been the case. Mrs. Panter didn't like mysterious people who turned up promiscuously like a cousin from the colonies in a play. She particularly disliked them when they were of the male persuasion, for you never knew where you were with them. There was always a danger that they might queer your pitch.

It was because Mrs. Panter didn't quite know where she was with John that she alternated between two extremes of conduct, unable to make up her mind which line to pursue. In the first shock of discovery she had adopted an attitude of lofty disdain which she was forced to acknowledge had not altogether met with success. It might be more worth her while to win him over to her side. This was the after-dinner frame of mind engendered, as aforesaid, by meat and drink of an agreeable nature and strengthened by every sip of the benedictine which Barnby had handed with the coffee.

She was unaware, naturally, of the preprandial conversation between the object of her meditations and Miss Bellamy concerning herself, else a different view of the situation might have presented itself to her.

She trimmed her sails accordingly and, being a clever woman, started off by consolidating her position. Clergymen, she understood, were keen on domesticity so she would

begin by clearing away any lurking suspicion on that score.

"I had a letter from Gavin this morning, Biddy," she said down the table. "Poor darling! He finds the climate dreadfully trying."

Having thus paved the way she turned to John.

"That's my husband," she informed him, with a little sigh which was intended to convey resignation to the inscrutable decrees of Providence. "He's out in Tanganyika Territory managing a rubber plantation. The climate's too awful. He won't hear of my joining him, so he's there and I'm here, thousands of miles apart from one another. But what can one do? One must live, and one just took anything that came along after one was demobilized. We did discuss my going out but he absolutely refused to allow me."

She didn't think it necessary to render a verbatim report of the discussion in question, which was just as well for it was short and to the point and lacked that poignancy at which she hinted, consisting as it did of two sentences and two only. Mrs. Panter's contribution to it had been, "Well, if you think I'm going to leave London and all my friends and bury myself in a savage country, I'm not, so there!" to which her husband had replied "Good God, *I* don't want you to," and it had been left at that. If Mr. Panter had no illusions about his wife he had, at any rate, absolute trust in her. He would as soon have mistrusted a goldfish swimming in a glass bowl as his spouse, not so much because he had an unduly high opinion of the morals of a goldfish as because he realised the limitations which a glass bowl imposes. Society was Mrs. Panter's glass bowl in which she swam lazily round and round and, unlike her prototype, she had the sense to appreciate the fact that if the bowl was upset she would find herself lying, gasping for breath, on the bare boards with every prospect of a messy end.

John, to tell the truth, was somewhat taken aback by this sudden exhibition of wifely devotion which, in fact, was so sudden that it rather lacked the artistic touch. It was like

a revoke at bridge, when a player puts down a card of the suit he has already passed and tries to gather up the trick with one and the same movement, to hide the mistake from his opponents.

It was only because Mrs. Panter felt that time was getting short for the exploitation of conjugality that she rushed in where an angel would not have taken the trouble to tread.

Even Biddy, least suspicious of mortals, wondered why the absent Mr. Panter was dragged in by the hair of his head, so to speak. He was not usually a topic of conversation with his wife and, on the rare occasions when she did happen to allude to him it was not, as a rule, as a "poor darling." It was perplexing, too, to learn that it was stress of circumstances of a pecuniary nature which had compelled this banishment to distant lands. Biddy had certainly understood from Mrs. Panter that it had something to do with a "concession," whatever that might be, and that the post of manager to the rubber plantation was a secondary consideration intended as a blind, to prevent any other unauthorised person getting wind of the transaction.

However, as she could not very well pick holes in the accuracy of a statement made by one of her guests, Biddy contented herself by murmuring some remark of a non-commital kind which was a quite unnecessary waste of breath, for Mrs. Panter was so busily engaged in submitting to the will of heaven for John's benefit that it was lost upon her. It was so unlike Carrie to submit to the will of heaven or indeed any other will than her own that it caused quite a mild sensation round the table and John realised with some embarrassment that the four who were not the actual recipients of Mrs. Panter's confidences were listening to them with varying degrees of amusement, discreetly blended with incredulity, depicted on their faces.

Miss Bellamy fixed a pair of pince-nez firmly on the bridge of her nose and surveyed Mrs. Panter with that air of detached interest which a maiden aunt assumes who has taken her nephews and nieces to the local pantomime and

doesn't want to damp their spirits by showing how bored she is with the whole proceedings. Mr. Franklin cracked nuts explosively and smiled at them while he did so as though they shared a joke in common. Biddy leaned forward with one elbow on the table, her chin supported on the back of her hand, a dimple denting her cheek and betraying her.

Sir Charles was the only one who made any comment.

"Gosh, Carrie," he said, "you're a blooming marvel. How *do* you do it?"

Perhaps it was as well that the entrance of Barnby to say the car was at the door coincided with this remark for, to judge by the expression on Mrs. Panter's face at this rude interruption to her flow of eloquence, Sir Charles would have received short shrift from her.

As it was the announcement caused a general uprising from the table and an exodus into the hall where coats and wraps were donned by the theatre-going party while Miss Bellamy and John stood by watching the preparations for departure.

"I shan't be back till goodness knows what time," Biddy informed Miss Bellamy. "I'm dancing at the Eccles' and I may possibly look in at the Hurd's as well. I wish you were coming with us, John. Don't go. Stop and keep Belle company for a bit. And leave your address. Perhaps one of these days I'll come and have tea with you if you'll have me and it won't be too much of a shock to Mrs. Grundy. Anyhow you'll come and see me again, won't you? We mustn't let another twelve years elapse! If we do you may find me with a chestnut wig and then you would certainly refuse to recognise me. Good-bye, John. Good-night, Belle, my own. Is it 'my own' or Mahone? I had a nurse who used to sing me to sleep with that song, but as she was a little rocky over her aitches I never discovered whether the suffix to Belle was an endearment or merely a surname. Not that it really matters, does it?"

"Good-night, Mr. Ffoulkes, and I'm sorry your pulpit is

situated at such a distance. I'd love to hear another discourse from you, but it will have to wait till you get a living somewhere nearer, say Yorkshire or the Cornish Riviera," Mrs. Panter said, giving John a little nod. She didn't offer to shake hands, feeling that to do so would be to cut off her line of retreat, a position in which no strategist ever allows himself to be placed.

The two men contented themselves by saying "Good-night," the younger with a certain degree of friendliness, the elder with a hint of patronage in his manner which left John quite unimpressed with his own obvious inferiority to this star dazzling in the social firmament.

"Well, that's that," remarked Miss Bellamy thankfully, when she and John found themselves alone. "Let's go upstairs to the drawing room and indulge ourselves in an orgy of pharisaicalism or whatever the word is which you employ when you're sorry for all the poor people who aren't as nice as you are yourself."

She led the way to the stairs as she spoke and John followed.

"I used sometimes to visit the wounded Tommies in the hospital," she said on the way up. "There was one man, I remember, who was in the habit of describing anything which did not meet with his approval as 'the ruddy limit.' I think it must have been a tempering of the wind to the shorn lamb, for the sister in charge of the ward used to allude to it as 'Corporal Mackenzie's poetical licence,' from which I gathered that he was rather more discursive when I was not present. Be that as it may, it appealed to me as an expression which a perfect lady might adopt for her own use in moments of stress without forfeiting her title as such, so please don't look on me as an abandoned female if I employ the term in reference to a certain person who shall be nameless."

They had reached the drawing room by this time and Miss Bellamy resumed the seat she had occupied before dinner and took up her knitting from the table.

"Sit down," she said to John, "and light your pipe, if you've got one. I like to see a man smoking. It gives me the same comfortable feeling that I have when I watch a baby sucking its bottle. It insures a period of quiescence without any undue effort on one's own part."

"That sounds as if you expected to find the burden of entertaining me an onerous one without artificial aids," John observed.

"I'm just running no risks, that's all," said Miss Bellamy. "After all, we've known one another about a couple of hours so we've no mutual reminiscences to fall back upon. You don't know any of my interests and I don't know any of yours — except Biddy."

John would have liked to ask on what grounds Miss Bellamy based her supposition that Biddy was included in his interests. It was a word which might mean much or little according to circumstances and he wondered if by any chance she was aware of that incident which had occurred in the cavern in the dim distant past. It was the thought of this which kept back the words hovering on the tip of his tongue.

"Biddy and I were rather — pals, in the old days," he said instead.

If he hoped to draw Miss Bellamy by this remark it signally failed in its purpose.

"Were you?" was her sole comment uttered in a disinterested tone.

"What I can't understand is how she and Mrs. Panter come to be friends. I shouldn't have thought they'd anything in common," he said.

"They haven't — yet," Miss Bellamy replied.

"How do you mean 'yet'," enquired John.

Miss Bellamy lowered her work and looked across at him.

"Mr. Ffoulkes," she said deliberately, "Biddy is nearly thirty but she knows a good deal less about the world than many a girl half her age. She married, as you have been told, when she was barely nineteen and spent the next six

years of her life ministering to the wants of a selfish old man who tied her to his side and considered she had fulfilled her destiny when she became his wife. It never occurred to him that she might miss the companionship of those of her own generation or that her youth and spirits required an outlet. He was one of those short-sighted people who quote glibly 'As a husband is the wife is,' and leave it at that. He squandered his own birthright and when he was bankrupt of health and strength demanded of Biddy that she should pay a share of the price. Is it any wonder she felt defrauded? Are you surprised that, when she found herself free at last and realised that she had been cheated of six of the best years of her life, years during which she could have been developing and learning the value of life instead of being shut away in a dark cellar into which no ray of light ever penetrated, she threw herself into the stream and let it carry her along? She'd never had an opportunity of even paddling on the edge of it so what could she know of its currents? My poor little Biddy!"

"But she's quite different to Mrs. Panter," John protested vigorously.

"At present she is," said Miss Bellamy gravely. "At present the current isn't strong. She could swim out of it quite easily now. That's where the danger lies."

"'I don't think I understand," John said, puzzled.

"She doesn't realise the danger ahead," explained Miss Bellamy. "It's so easy and pleasant to float down the stream with one's eyes shut, but if one does that one does not see that the stream is widening and the banks receding on either hand, or notice that the current is sweeping one rapidly along where before one only gently glided. And when one does wake up to the fact it is too late. The stream has one for keeps."

"But — but Mrs. Panter is — isn't — " John stammered. He suddenly felt frightened for Biddy though for what reason he didn't quite know, only Miss Bellamy looked so serious and spoke so enigmatically that his mind leapt

to all kinds of imaginings. He appeared so alarmed that Miss Bellamy hastened to reassure him.

" Mrs. Panter's nothing but a clever silly woman, if there can be such a flat contradiction of epithets. I'm not hinting that she's trying to undermine Biddy's morals. If I really thought such a thing as that, do you suppose for a single moment that I should be even moderately polite to the creature? All I'm trying to imply is that she belongs to a set that lives for the present and what the present has to offer in the way of excitement, with whom the past is past because it never had any roots and is withered away, and who only plan for the future in so far as it affects their own well-being. If there isn't any actual positive harm in them there's plenty of negative. Their sins, if that isn't too descriptive a word for them, are almost exclusively sins of omission, but I'm not at all sure I wouldn't rather have the other kind. At any rate there's more virility about a sin of commission. Biddy doesn't really care about them, but they exist for excitement and excitement is a form of anodyne. It's like drugs or drink. You go on and on increasing the dose until you can't live without it. It's what we've got to save Biddy from. Somehow or other we've got to get her out of the current before it overpowers her. We've got to throw her a rope and pull for all we're worth. I'm not strong enough to do it alone. You must help me. Will you?"

" Why, of course, you know I will," John said. " Thank you for asking me."

" The question is, where are we to get a rope?" said Miss Bellamy.

John pondered.

" There's a house to let for August and September at Porth Ros. The people who had taken it can't come and they're trying to sublet. It's the very same house Mrs. Mercer took twelve years ago. Mightn't it be worth while to persuade her to take it? It might prove an even more

efficient landmark than I should. Anyhow it would be going back to the starting point."

Miss Bellamy nodded.

"An excellent suggestion," she remarked.

She cogitated for a few moments, then added:

"I'll go and see Dr. Neame tomorrow."

"To get him to order Biddy there?"

Miss Bellamy shook her head.

"That would be too crude altogether," she said. "No. To get him to order me there."

"But what's the good of that if you can't have the house till August or anyhow the end of July?" objected John.

"I'm very much afraid the long railway would be too much for me at present. A couple of months' complete rest and wind up the cure with another two months on the North coast of Cornwall will be what he will say, I feel almost certain. Porth Ros is the North coast, isn't it? We mustn't make a mistake."

"Yes. It's the North coast," John told her.

"Well, don't forget to leave your address — for Biddy," said the astute lady, and this time there was no doubt about the wink that accompanied her words.

CHAPTER V

It was getting on for four o'clock before Biddy reached home. She had " looked in " at the Hurd's as she had told Miss Bellamy she might and had found such a pleasant dance in full swing that she had stopped an hour instead of the ten minutes she had intended.

She never allowed either Barnby or the footman to sit up for her and when the car drew up at her door she jumped out of it before Rands had time to leave his seat and had the key in the latch without giving him a chance of assisting her in any way.

" Good-night, Rands," she called out, as she let herself in.

" Good-night, Ma'am," returned the man, and the car drove off directly she was safely inside with the door shut. He didn't want to waste any unnecessary time in getting to bed once his mistress was securely housed.

Biddy switched on the lights and, with a little yawn and a weary stretch of the arms, dropped her cloak off her shoulders on to the floor, where it lay in an untidy heap.

On the table in the middle of the square hall lay a few letters which had come by the evening post and beside them a small oblong of pasteboard. There was also a tray with a plate of sandwiches, a glass jug containing hock-cop, and a tumbler upon it.

Biddy advanced to the table idly wondering who could have called and left his card since she had gone out. After dinner was hardly an orthodox hour for paying visits, she reflected.

She gave vent to a little laugh of amusement when she picked up the card and read the name inscribed thereon, for it was John's and above it was written in pencil, " Mrs. Grundy at home."

Helping herself to a sandwich from the plate and crossing to the fireplace Biddy propped the card against a vase at one end of the mantel-piece and stood there with an elbow resting on the shelf while she nibbled at her modest repast, her thoughts going back over the events of the previous afternoon from the time when she had come into Mrs. Chaworth's drawing room and found John in possession of it. It had been good to see him again. It had been like opening an old disused cabinet and finding at the back of a drawer a packet of ancient letters faintly perfumed with the scent of sandalwood — old letters which had been put away there years ago and forgotten. They brought back to the memory so many incidents unremembered till then, but they brought, too, many regrets. They touched chords which had not vibrated for so long that they sounded cracked and quavering instead of rich and full.

Well! Brooding over the past did no good. Twelve years had rolled over the sands of time since she and John had laughed away those summer days at Porth Ros. The castles built in those sands had long ago been knocked down by the waves and nothing of them remained.

She gave a little shake of her shoulders as though she were ridding herself of some incubus and turning went over to where she had dropped her cloak and picked it up off the floor then, with it over her arm, walked slowly towards the stairs.

She switched off the lights when she reached the archway leaving the hall in darkness save for a beam from a street lamp which pierced the fan-light above the front door, making a yellow splodge on the wall. The stairs led up into soft blackness, a region of mystery and enchantment where all sorts of unseen things might lurk. There was something rather thrilling in venturing into it, feeling one's way cautiously along with one hand on the banister and with the other cutting strokes in the pitch darkness ahead, added to which was the excitement, pleasurable because of its improbability, of suddenly coming in contact with a yielding

body which could only be there at that hour of the night for some nefarious purpose. It was easy enough to dispel the darkness with a single pressure of the finger but Biddy childishly enjoyed stealing up without putting the lights on. More people than is popularly supposed, who have arrived at so-called years of discretion, cherish some infantile game of their own which they play when they are by themselves with no one to scoff at them for doing so. It is a magic carpet which bears them back in a moment of time to the luscious country where ogres and giants and bogies of all kinds lurk in the shadows and where princes in shining armour spend hectic lives rescuing distressed damsels. Biddy had cautiously negotiated the three bottom stairs when she suddenly stopped dead and caught her breath, for a low hesitating knock sounded on the front door. It was so uncertain and gentle that, for a second, she thought her ears had deceived her and that what she had heard had been one of those unaccountable nocturnal noises of which the night is so full. She had just made up her mind that she had been mistaken when once more she heard it again. This time there was no doubt about it. Tap — tap — tap. The sound of knuckles on wood and obviously from the other side of the front door.

Her first impulse was to bolt upstairs and, from the fastness of her bedroom, ring for somebody to come to the rescue. Pride, however, came to her aid. It was too ridiculous to be frightened of somebody on the wrong side of a locked and bolted door. It might only be Rands returning with something of hers which he had found in the car. So she tried to argue with herself but she knew perfectly well it wasn't Rands. Nevertheless, she retraced her steps to the door, turning on every available light en route. The darkness had all of a sudden lost its softness and become menacing and terrifying.

"Is that you, Rands?" she called out sharply because, in spite of her assurance that there was absolutely nothing to be frightened of, she *was* frightened.

A voice outside, a man's voice, made some reply, unintelligible through the thickness of the wood, and after a momentary hesitation she unbolted and unlocked the door, then opened it as far as the chain would allow.

"Is that you, Rands?" she demanded once again, picking up her skirts ready to make a dash for safety if the untimely visitor proved to be an armed burglar. She did not stop to reason that armed burglars do not, as a general rule, knock at the front door and claim admittance through it.

"I beg your pardon but you dropped this," the voice said, and she noticed even in the midst of her agitation that it was an educated one and unmistakably that of a gentleman.

At the same time a hand appeared through the slit holding something. She could not distinguish what it was for the fingers threw a shadow upon it and she made no attempt to take it.

"What is it?" she asked suspiciously.

"It's a sort of pendant thing, I think," the owner of the voice said.

Biddy's hand went up to her throat instinctively. Yes! It was quite true. The diamond pendant she had been wearing on a chain round her neck was missing.

"You dropped it as you got out of your car," the voice continued. "Please take it quickly or I'll get into trouble if a bobby hoves in sight."

Biddy considered. What if the hand grasped her by the wrist as she took the pendant? She wasn't going to run any unnecessary risks! She opened her lips to tell the stranger to drop the thing on the floor so that she might shut the door and pick it up afterwards, but once more pride prevented her. She wasn't going to give it away that she was frightened.

A sudden inspiration took her.

Beside the door stood one of those rather antiquated chairs which, with some slight manipulation, are convertible

into step-ladders. She pulled it out from the wall and, after some fumbling, discovered how the mechanism worked, then, dragging it near the door, mounted it and found she was just able, by standing on tip-toe, to see through the fan-light the stranger who stood patiently on the step outside, his hand still plunged through the slit in the door.

The light from the street lamp fell on him so that Biddy, though he was standing so close to the door that nothing of him was visible below the shoulders, could see his face distinctly.

He was tall and clean shaven with sharp-cut features and his chin had a cleft which softened the firm set of it, though it did not altogether eliminate its dogged obstinacy. He was leaning against the pillar which flanked the doorway with head thrown back and eyes closed (which was lucky for Biddy as otherwise he could not have failed to see her) and with a look of such utter weariness that she had to stifle the ejaculation of pity which rose to her lips at the sight of him. His mouth was curved in a smile which held more of contemptuous bitterness than amusement and his cheeks were drawn and pinched so that the line of his jaw stood out hard and square and ugly as if it were a band of iron framing the rest of his face. But with all his hardness there was no hint of viciousness or even cruelty about him. It was not natural to him but stamped there by privation, and Biddy's fears vanished instantly at the sight. She clambered down from her post of observation hurriedly.

"Wait a minute. I'll open the door," she called out, fumbling at the chain.

"I'm afraid you'll have to move your hand," she said after a minute. "I can't get the chain off unless I shut the door."

"Please don't be long," he said anxiously. "If a policeman happens to come along I shall get into trouble."

Biddy waited only till the hand was withdrawn, then closed the door, undid the chain, and opened it again.

"I'm awfully sorry if I frightened you," the stranger

said, when at last he and Biddy stood face to face. "I — I ought to have called out when I saw the thing drop."

He held it out to her as he spoke and Biddy took it from him.

"Why didn't you?" she asked. Now that he had put the idea into her mind it certainly did seem odd that he should have waited until the car had driven off, and indeed for some considerable time after she was safely indoors, before making any effort to restore her property. For an instant her doubts revived. What if it was a plot? Perhaps he had accomplices near at hand ready to rush the house at a given signal and overpower her before she was able to shriek for help. She looked searchingly at her mysterious visitor, with curiosity not unmixed with apprehension.

"Why didn't you call out?" she repeated.

The light from the hall poured out upon him and by it she could see his pallid cheeks flush and notice the muscles of his throat working as though he were swallowing down some emotion, but still he made no reply and a third time she put the question.

This time he answered but in tones so low that she had to bend forward to catch the words.

"I —— I saw the diamonds sparkling and —— I'm hungry."

He finished the sentence with a rush, almost as though it were forced out of him against his will and turned away his head but not before Biddy had caught a glimpse of the expression in his eyes. It was like that of some animal trapped in a snare, worn out with futile struggling to free itself and waiting terror-stricken for it knows not what.

"Oh!" There was a world of pity in the cry which that look of hopelessness wrung from Biddy, but to ears unattuned to pity it held only loathing and contempt.

He faced her once more and set his jaw stubbornly.

"You don't understand. How should you?" he said bitterly, with a quick, contemptuous glance at her which took in with one sweep her smart frock of some rose-coloured

material, the silk stockings to match, the brocaded shoes, the jewels gleaming in her hair and on her fingers.

"Hunger and want and cold and misery! What are they to you but names? You, who have everything you desire — more than you desire — whose soul is clogged with luxury and ease. What should you know of those who walk the streets in rags, without one single person in the whole wide world to care whether they live or die? Do you ever remember, when you sit down to your own over-laden table, that there are poor wretches who, if they hadn't forgotten how to give thanks, would say their grace for a crust picked out of a gutter?"

He stopped, exhausted by his own vehemence.

"But — you're a gentleman, aren't you?"

The question was forced out of Biddy's lips against her will and before she realised what the words implied.

He laughed bitterly.

"Thank you for reminding me. I beg your pardon," he said. "I'm afraid I forgot it for the moment. Gentleman! I suppose I was once. I almost wish to God I hadn't been. It has its drawbacks! The instincts survive. But for that you wouldn't have seen your pendant again and I'd at least have lived like a gentleman for a month or two even if I'd forfeited the right to the title. Listen!"

A heavy footfall sounded along the street, coming nearer and nearer.

"That's the copper," he said quickly. "They're inquisitive brutes. He'll want to know what I am doing on your doorstep at this hour of the morning. You'd better shut yourself in, else he'll wonder what you've got to do with it and that wouldn't be very pleasant for you. Good-bye."

He turned to go, but she laid a detaining hand on his arm.

"Please go in," he said, "and switch off the lights."

"But you?" she asked.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Loitering with intent to commit a felony or any other

cock and bull story his lawfulness chooses to concoct for the benefit of the magistrate. Once you're under you're jolly well kept there. Not that it really matters. My self-respect went with my clothes."

The footsteps sounded very near now. Something must be done. Before he could realise her intentions, Biddy had seized him by the arm, pulled him bodily into the house, shut and locked the door behind them both.

"By Jove! That's what one might describe as a bolt from the blue," he exclaimed, forgetting, in the excitement of the moment, the strange position in which he was placed.

"Stand over there," Biddy ordered him, pointing to the corner at the angle between the fireplace and the left-hand window.

"What are you going to do?" he asked, as he obeyed.

"He'll have seen the light across the road. He may investigate, if we don't anticipate his curiosity," Biddy said.

She went to the window on the further side of the front door and very deliberately drew apart the curtains which hung across it, pulled up the blind and, picking up the letters which lay on the table, stood reading them on a spot where anybody passing along the pavement could not fail to see her plainly.

The steps outside drew level with the window, paused for the fraction of a second, during which the constable was evidently taking stock of the room and its only visible occupant, then passed on and gradually died away in the distance.

Biddy pulled down the blind again and drew the curtains before turning to her companion.

Now that she could see him properly she found him to be a good deal younger than he had looked when he was standing on the doorstep. She judged him to be about twenty-six or even less. His hair, which hitherto had been hidden by a cap, was a dark brown and rippled back from his forehead in little waves. He was dressed in a blue serge suit which had obviously seen better days, and one of his

boots had a split in its side showing the sock through. Round his neck he wore a muffler of rather hard looking cloth, which did duty for a collar. The cuffs of his shirt were frayed at the edges and round the bottoms of the trousers, where they were turned up over the boots, ran a thin, patchy line of caked mud. Like their wearer, the garments gave an impression of having come down in the world, for they were well cut and, in spite of their raggedness and neglect, bore the unmistakable stamp of having been built by a good tailor.

Biddy threw a quick glance at the plate of sandwiches which lay on the table. It was poor fare for a man who had just acknowledged he was hungry, but she didn't know how to get him anything more substantial without causing him embarrassment. Anyhow it was better than nothing. She poured out a glass of the hock-cup and was conscious, as she did so, of a sudden stiffening on the part of her strange guest, as if he were compelling himself to master some almost irresistible impulse, and she guessed that his attention had, for the first time, been drawn to the fact that there was food and drink within reach, and that he was nerving himself to act as though he were unaware of it.

"Have a sandwich?" she asked, in tones which she carefully tried to make matter of fact, as though it were the customary thing to offer refreshments to seedy young men who knocked upon your front door at unseemly hours of the night.

She held out the plate of sandwiches as she spoke, smiling at him in friendly fashion, but he made no movement to come forward and help himself.

"I mustn't stop," he said, and turned his head away so as not to see the sight of food.

"Please," she said, "I'll keep you company."

She carried the plate and tumbler of hock-cup to a low table which stood opposite the fireplace between two armchairs.

"Come and sit down and tell me all about it," she said.

Slowly, reluctantly, almost as if he were impelled by some will stronger than his own, the man came towards her and sat down in the chair she indicated.

He made no attempt to help himself from the plate that stood at his elbow but, instead, sat there with his hands clasped between his knees and his head bent, and Biddy, with sudden horror, realised that he was crying, not noisily or uncontrollably, but silently and without making any sound; indeed, it was only by the heaving of his shoulders and seeing the tears splashing unheeded on to his clenched hands that she was aware of it. It was as though the sympathy in her voice had broken down some invisible barrier which had dammed his emotions and that the pent-up feelings of months had poured through the outlet, and overwhelmed him.

Biddy leaned across and laid her hand gently on his arm.

"You poor boy!" she said, the maternal in her rising to the surface at the sight of his utter abandonment.

With a supreme effort he managed to regain his self-control, though he still sat with bowed head, not looking at her, only now, she noticed, he unlaced his fingers and began fidgetting with them, locking and unlocking them, pulling, twisting, torturing them, with quick incessant movements which never stopped for a single instant.

"I'm frightfully sorry," he said at last, shamefacedly. "That's a poor way of showing thanks for your kindness."

"Tell me," she insisted, touched by the very weakness for which he asked pardon.

"Is there any use?" He put the question wearily. "I'm only a passerby. Presently the darkness will swallow me up and, even if you remember and throw me a backward glance, you won't see me."

"Why not? The day is breaking." She got up and, going to the window, once more pulled the curtains apart and drew the blind up. Outside, the darkness had given way to the faint gray of early dawn, through which the houses on the further side of the street loomed dimly.

Biddy threw up the window and, as she did so, the cheeping of the newly-awakened sparrows fell upon their ears.

"Look — and listen," she said.

"I've had my day such as it was," her guest replied shortly.

She turned and bent towards him a swift glance.

"Aren't we a little apt to think day is done because the sun goes behind the clouds for a while?"

Even as she said the words it suddenly struck her that she was trying to inculcate in him a lesson which she had not yet learned herself, and with this thought came a fellow feeling for this sport of Fate, and a strange sense of comradeship.

She came back slowly into the room and resumed her seat on the other side of the little table.

"Eat something to please me if not yourself," she begged him, and this time he did not resist.

She watched him as he ate. It was obvious that he was ravenous but he forced himself to eat slowly as if the food in itself was of no moment. It comforted him and helped him to recover the self-respect, which he foolishly and quite erroneously felt that he had forfeited by his breakdown just now, by trying to imagine that he was an ordinary guest being entertained under ordinary circumstances. Moreover, if he had eaten according to his inclinations he would have shocked and alarmed his hostess, who could not be expected to know what the pangs of real gnawing hunger were.

Biddy took a sandwich herself. She did not want it, but she thought it would make the occasion less marked if she shared his meal. They formed a curious contrast, the woman in her dainty rose-coloured evening dress, the man in his shabby worn suit, but she was too interested to take any heed of the awkwardness of the situation or to reflect that it was hardly customary to sit eating sandwiches and drinking hock-cup at half-past four in the morning with

an entirely strange young man possessing no credentials and with every facility given him for hitting his solitary companion over the head and relieving her of her valuables.

Not that Biddy would have been the least uneasy even if this last contingency had crossed her mind. The sight of his tears had destroyed any lingering doubt which might have been lurking in her brain as to his trustworthiness. No one with criminal intent could have pumped up those drops which she had seen splashing down on to his hands. They were genuine enough. The most finished actor could not have counterfeited them.

It was the man who first realised the enormity of the whole proceeding. Till now he had been too overwrought to think coherently. He sprang up from his seat with an exclamation of dismay when he did so.

"I say!" he said, in tones of horror. "I oughtn't to be here."

"Why not?" enquired Biddy calmly.

"Well, look — look at the hour and — look at me." He stuttered with a sudden horrified consciousness of his tatterdemalion appearance. What would anybody think or say if they discovered her hobnobbing with a man who, on the face of it, was nothing more or less than a tramp? And at half-past four in the morning, too!

With this thought came a reminder of all the other occupants of the house whom, up till then, he had forgotten. At any moment one of the sleeping people upstairs might awaken and, hearing the sound of voices, come down to investigate. Who they were or of what they might consist he was not in a position to be able to say, but at any rate there must be servants, if nobody else, in a house of this size and importance.

The bare idea of such a thing happening brought out little beads of perspiration on his forehead.

Biddy eyed him in some surprise, not altogether unmixed with amusement. That her course of action in bringing an unknown person of the male persuasion into the

house at such an hour might, if made public, occasion remark did not trouble her in the least and that he should be the one to have qualms on the subject struck her as so highly humourous that she felt strongly inclined to laugh.

"Why! I do believe you're shocked," she exclaimed banteringly, but there was no answering smile on his face. Instead, he looked preternaturally grave and solemn.

"You see," he said, with a ring of hurt pride in his voice, "I may be a scarecrow now but I did once live in a world where it was regarded as the accepted thing to — to take care of one's women. I suppose my susceptibilities have got blunted for I seem to have forgotten. I must apologise."

"So hide-bound convention didn't expire when war broke out," Biddy said, with a certain show of impatience, but if she hoped to inveigle him into a discussion she signally failed in her purpose for he only observed, "I'll be getting along now," and turned as if to go.

He had nearly reached the door before she realised his intention, but when she did she got up quickly from her chair and wheeled round facing in his direction.

"But you haven't told me," she said.

He paused uncertainly. The temptation to remain was strong. He was loath to go away, to leave behind him the amenities to which he had been for so long a stranger and go out again into the world which held no place for him, the world which could do very well without him and which he could do very well without. For an all too brief spell he had tasted once more the ordinary comforts which mean so little to those accustomed to them, so much to those who have been deprived of them. To rest his aching limbs in a softly-padded easy-chair, to eat food daintily served, to talk to one of his own class as an equal, to feast his eyes on that rosy vision (Aurora goddess of Dawn, he mentally designated her) with the cloud of dark hair like a nimbus about her head, to lave his parched soul in the tender pity which overflowed from her! Once outside, with the door bolted

and barred behind him, all these things, at present actualities, would become mere memories and, precious as they might be, they would only serve to deepen the surrounding gloom. Small wonder was it that he hesitated to take the plunge and relegate them to the limbo of the past.

Biddy noticed his irresolution and took advantage of it to press her point.

"Come and sit down again," she begged. "You can't go now without telling me. Don't you think you — owe it to me?"

Half unwillingly, half gladly he succumbed at last to the temptation, knowing full well that he ought to go, yet yielding to the opportunity given him of prolonging this glimpse of paradise so unexpectedly vouchsafed.

"Would it really interest you to hear?" he asked, coming slowly back to his seat.

"Yes, it really would," Biddy replied. "Draw the curtains before you sit down."

He obeyed with a little grim smile. In spite of her gibes at "hidebound convention" his benefactress evidently did not intend to risk being seen talking to him by any chance passerby, unlikely as such a contingency was at that hour. All the same, if her inconsistency diverted him, the precautionary measure was a relief. His conscience was pricking him for his weakness in giving way and not refusing to spin out this interview and he was terribly frightened of placing her in a false position.

"Now," she said when he had once more resumed his seat.

She noticed again that restless movement of the fingers and realised what a tremendous effort it was to him to unburden himself, but she knew that she must harden her heart and pay no heed to these signals of distress if she were ever to learn his history, and that she was determined to do, for she had a sort of feeling that something more than mere chance had brought about their strange meeting. Some subtle instinct told her that it was his misfortune and

not his fault that had reduced him to his present straights and, for the first time, she awakened to the fact of the power which lay in her hands to set his feet back on the path from which they had strayed.

"Well, then," he began with a rush. "My name is —— I think, if you don't mind, we'll let my name go."

"I'd rather you told me," she interrupted.

"Of course, if you wish it, I can't very well refuse. My name, then, is Dibden, Roger Dibden. My father was a parson down in the country and, as I had no brothers or sisters and my mother died when I was quite a little chap, we had nobody but one another. I suppose, looking back, I had rather a lonely childhood, but I didn't realise it at the time. We were tremendous pals, my father and I, and I didn't seem to feel the need of anybody else. I had the usual up-bringing. I went to a private school when I was ten, and later on to a public school. There never appeared to be any lack of money. I had a weekly allowance the same as other boys, and the right kind of clothes, and I was allowed to ask my friends to come and stay in the holidays without feeling any qualms as to the hospitality I was able to offer them. I had a pony to ride and, in due course, a gun. I shot and fished and played cricket and football and generally had a good time like my pals and my father never by word or look hinted that he was hard put to it to make both ends meet. He ought to have told me. It wasn't fair. He ought to have trusted me. It was only when he died that I discovered that the money he spent on my education, the money he poured out upon me for my own selfish gratifications and which he never denied me, the money which paid for my clothes and food and amusements, in none of which things I was ever stinted in the smallest degree, was all borrowed. Like so many persons my old Dad knew about as much of business matters as a babe unborn. He started speculating with his small capital after my mother died and he was left alone with the prospect of my education to face in the not too distant

future. He was so proud of me, my old Dad, that anything but the very best in the way of schooling never even entered his head. For himself he was the most humble-minded man I have met, but for me nothing was too good. Of course the speculations went wrong and he lost the few thousands he had. This was the year before I went to school. I found that out from his diaries. I suppose he lost his head then, for he started borrowing from money-lenders with the usual result. The interest had to be paid and, of course, my expenses grew heavier as time went on. He got deeper and deeper into the slough and borrowed more money to pay the interest on the original loan and when he died (I was in France at the time) there wasn't enough money, even after everything that could be sold had been, to pay what was owing." He stopped abruptly and Biddy waited for him to go on, but at the end of a minute or two, when the silence continued and, to judge from his air of abstraction, he seemed to have let his thoughts wander on without any attempt to give voice to them, she gently jogged his memory.

"You were in France. Was it during the war?" she asked.

He nodded.

"I was eighteen when the war broke out," he replied. "I'd just finished my last term at school and was going to Oxford in October. Of course I joined up."

"As a private?"

"Yes. I didn't get my commission for two and a half years."

"Was that before your father died?"

"Three months before. In a way that was luck, for I was able to save a bit out of my pay towards paying off the creditors."

"Then?"

Biddy felt rather like counsel examining a hostile witness, but she saw that it was only by questioning him that she would arrive at that part of his history which chiefly inter-

ested her, namely how he had reached his present low ebb, so she deliberately shut her eyes to his evident reluctance and ruthlessly continued her cross-examination.

"Then the end of the war came and I was demobbed. It never occurred to me that there could be any difficulty in finding a job. I thought employers would be tumbling over one another to give work to the men who had fought. I forgot that women had come into the field and filled up the gaps and weren't too ready to vacate their posts. I overlooked the fact, too, that I had no experience. I was twenty-three and the only job I was really fitted for was that of office-boy and nobody seemed willing to engage me, at my age, in that capacity. My gratuity had followed what I could spare out of my pay into the pockets of the creditors so I was up against a pretty tough proposition, as you can imagine."

"But — hadn't you any friends who could have helped you?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"It was a case of 'I cannot dig, to beg I am ashamed'," he said, and Biddy noticed the curious mixture of pride and self-contempt in his voice as he made the statement.

"Wasn't it a little foolish?" she suggested.

"I was young then and youth is apt to act foolishly. I made so sure I could make good on my own."

"You aren't so very old now, are you?" Biddy observed. "It is only three years ago."

"One doesn't reckon by years," he answered.

"By what, then?"

"By experience. The causes of growing old are mental as much as physical. One reads of people whose hair has turned white in a single night as the result of some terrifying or, it may be, heart-breaking experience they have undergone. There is no gradual process of decay. One day they are young, the next they are old. They leap, as it were, the chasm between youth and age. They don't labouriously clamber down one side and up the other. You may call a

thing like that a physical consequence but, even so, it's a lightning transformation from one state to another and if it can happen physically it can happen mentally. There aren't always outward and visible signs of decay."

"Well, what did you do then?" asked Biddy, sternly fetching him back from the side-track into which he had wandered.

"I struggled along as best I could, earning a few shillings here and there by directing envelopes and such-like jobs, which led nowhere and left me in no better position when I had finished them than I had been in when I began. At last, in a mood of desperation, I did bring myself to apply to one of those associations formed for the express purpose of assisting ex-officers to get jobs. They found me one, eventually, as clerk in a firm of wholesale drapers. It wasn't exactly an exhilarating existence, but it gave me food to eat and clothes to put on my back and kept a roof over my head. It wasn't what I would have chosen but I had no choice and I'd reached the pitch when I was thankful to be able to take no thought for the morrow. I went on fairly happily for eighteen months and then there was a change. The head clerk of the department in which I was, retired, and they put in his place a man from another branch of the business. Directly I saw him I knew I was in for trouble. He was a man I recognised, Charlton by name, and he came from a place called Keylock which was the next village to Harwood, my father's parish. Years before, when he had been a young man living at home, he had got a girl, the daughter of one of the Harwood villagers, into — disgrace, and my father had taken the case up and made it so hot for this Charlton that he had had to leave the district. He wasn't the kind to take things lying down and almost the last thing he did before he went was to come to the Vicarage where he had a stormy interview with my father and left threatening to have his revenge. He was so melodramatic and talked so like a stage villain that nobody paid any attention to his blustering

and in time it passed from my memory. He was too much of a cowardly bully to ever risk his own skin by fulfilling his threats of personal violence, but I knew, by his expression when he realised who I was, that he had nursed his resentment all these years and that I might look out for squalls. I wasn't mistaken either. From the day he took over he seized every opportunity to get a bit of his own back. He had the screw on me and whenever he saw a chance gave it a twist. He made sneering remarks about me to my fellow clerks. He found fault with my work. He complained to the manager about me, making out that I was incompetent, that I shirked my work, that I was lazy and insolent and good for nothing. He even went so far as to throw out hints that my honesty was not above suspicion and, if I was going to be left alone in the office, ostentatiously locked up the drawer in which the petty cash was kept and took the key away in his pocket. I saw that his idea was to drive me away and just because of that I tried to stick it out. I bore it for six months and then, finding I suppose that he was no nearer accomplishing his purpose, he changed his tactics and suddenly one day started abusing my father, telling everybody, in front of me, how my father had educated me and brought me up to be 'an imitation gentleman' on borrowed money, and ended up by calling him a 'beggarly, thieving parson.' That finished me. I saw red and went for him and got him down on the floor and I honestly believe I'd have choked the life out of him if they hadn't pulled me off. I was dismissed, of course, then and there, and told that I need not apply to the firm for a reference. That did me. When I went again to the Association and asked them to find me another berth they made enquiries and, naturally accepting the firm's version of the reason for my being sent away without a character, refused to help me any further. That was last October. Since then I've done everything from breaking stones to touting for cabs. I've picked up any coppers in any way I could. Hunger's a wonderful cure for

pride! But until tonight I've never begged. Tonight sees the beginning of the end."

"You haven't begged tonight," Biddy said indignantly. "I told you I was hungry and you gave me food."

"Lots of my guests tell me they're hungry and I give them food."

"It's good of you to put it like that. And do lots of your guests tell you they had serious thoughts of stealing your jewelry?"

"Serious thoughts aren't accomplished facts."

"No. But they're the high road that leads to them."

"Well, you didn't anyhow."

"No. I didn't. There are drawbacks to having been brought up a gentleman, you see. I've come to the conclusion that hunger is a wonderful incentive to robbery with violence. If I'd stopped to think the matter out you'd probably never have seen your pendant again. Better instincts — my better instincts at any rate — are constructed to bear light temptations only."

There was a long pause when he had finished speaking, during which Biddy tried to find the right words with which to express herself, but before she could do so he got up from his chair.

"Thank you for a glimpse of paradise," he said. "The memory of this hour will be something to carry out with me into the darkness."

"But you aren't going like that," Biddy cried in distress. "Won't you let me help you?"

He drew himself up rather stiffly.

"Ah! Now you're spoiling it," he said regretfully. "I wanted to think of this hour as one snatched from the days that are gone. I wanted to dream that there was one who had shut her eyes to the fact that I was just an under-dog, and who had condescended, for a brief moment, to be my — friend."

"And to whom you deny the privileges of friendship! Do you call that consistent?"

He smiled.

"Are dreams ever consistent?" he asked wistfully. "How can a shadow of the night linger on in the light of day?"

Biddy tapped her foot impatiently.

"You mean you won't accept my help?"

He sighed despairingly.

"How can I make you understand?" he said. "It sounds absurd, under the circumstances, to talk of conventionality and yet if you only knew how I long to deceive myself, to pretend we have met in the ordinary conventional manner in which we might have done if — if things had panned out differently."

"Convention! The fetich which society savages worship!" said Biddy contemptuously. "If I was conventional do you suppose, for a moment, that I should have opened the door and let you in, that I should have sat here talking to you, that I should have listened to what you have told me? That for convention!" She snapped her fingers.

The ghost of a twinkle of laughter flickered in his eyes.

"And yet," he said, "I'd be willing to bet that you won't say a word to anybody in the morning about the midnight marauder. Mrs. Grundy is only scotched, not killed, by the war."

"Mrs. Grundy!"

How funny that he should have used that phrase. It was only at dinner that John had been saying much the same thing, she recollected. John! Of course! He was the very one to make use of in this emergency. Why had she not thought of him before?

"Look here," she said abruptly. "Will you go and see a friend of mine? I'm sure he could find some way to — to advise you. Tell him what you've just told me. You can even tell him how we came to meet. He's a great admirer of Mrs. Grundy's, but I'm perfectly certain that he'll admit that in this case nothing has occurred to outrage her susceptibilities in the slightest degree."

He glanced ruefully at his clothes.

"Oh, they don't matter," Biddy said lightly. "He lives in — let me see — Eddis Street, where, I believe, clothes are a concession to human weakness."

"Where is Eddis Street?"

"It's in the East End somewhere," she returned doubtfully. "There's his card on the mantelpiece."

He went across and looked at it.

"He's a parson!" he exclaimed when he had done so.

"Well. And if he is, what then?"

Roger shook his head.

"Parsons collect vagrants like schoolboys collect stamps. I should be classified and stuck in a little book and trotted out occasionally as an example of my species. No, thanks."

"My parson isn't a bit like that." A sudden idea struck her. "Look here, if you're shy of going alone, I'll meet you there."

His eyes glistened.

"Will you? If you only knew how you tempted me."

"Why not succumb?" Biddy said, seeing him begin to waver.

"By George! I will," he said, suddenly giving way. "That is, if you're sure you don't mind? What I mean is, you may feel differently when you come to think it over. I should hate to do it if — if it made it awkward. You see it — it isn't exactly usual to — to shelter casuals in the dead of night."

Biddy rose from her seat.

"You'll make me angry soon, Mr. Dibden," she said.

"I wouldn't do that for the world," he declared contritely. "Well, then, I'll go. What time shall I be there?"

"Five o'clock."

"Right-oh, and — thanks awfully."

Biddy liked him for not saying more. She somehow felt that any profuse protestations of gratitude would have savoured of the "Gawd bless yer, lidy" of the professional beggar and would have raised doubts in her mind. As it was, the simple declaration of thanks, which might have

proceeded with equal propriety from one of her partners at the end of a dance with him, only served to strengthen her belief that he had given her a plain ungarbled history of himself.

She gave him her hand before letting him out of the front door and he just held it in his for an instant, then he was gone.

"Poor Mrs. Grundy," she said to herself as she once again started on her way upstairs. "I wonder if she is having a bad nightmare!"

CHAPTER VI

JOHN had passed a disturbed night revolving in his mind the events of the preceding day from the moment when Biddy had so suddenly and unexpectedly appeared in his godmother's drawing room in Barrie Mansions.

Whenever he had thought of her during the time that had elapsed since they had last met he had always pictured her as she had been then, a lanky schoolgirl with skirts above her knees, bare legs and feet, and her hair done in a thick plait hanging down over one shoulder.

Of course, if he had brought his common sense to bear, he would have realised that she could not have remained a schoolgirl, that, in the natural course of events, she must have grown up and become a woman, but, not knowing in what form she had emerged from the chrysalis state, he had gone on imagining her as she had been then, without troubling to draw upon his fancy.

Therefore when, without any warning, she had appeared before his astonished eyes as the finished article it had proved somewhat disconcerting, and he found it difficult to dovetail in the Biddy of the present with the Biddy he had parted from twelve years previously, though he admitted that it was not so much a change as a development which had taken place. The half-finished sketch had been worked upon until it was now the completed picture.

From Biddy herself his mind wandered to Miss Bellamy and her confidences and he began to speculate whether perhaps, in her anxiety for her former pupil, she was not inclined to exaggerate the position she had outlined.

He had certainly not been particularly favourably struck by the trio he had met at dinner, but then everybody knew people who failed to arouse any enthusiasm in the breasts of their other friends. To argue from this that they were

actually undesirable was a dangerous doctrine. He was inclined to agree with Miss Bellamy's estimate of Mrs. Panter. He judged her, from the very slight opportunity he had had of arriving at any conclusion on the subject, to be one of those woman morally hard of hearing, who heed the voice of public opinion but are deaf to the still small whisper of conscience. No doubt she would exploit Biddy to the best of her ability, being one of those people who set a market value on their affections and look for repayment in kind, if not in cash, for services rendered. Mrs. Panter, John shrewdly suspected, would, without any compunction whatever, cut her friends according to their cloth.

Miss Bellamy, he acknowledged, was better situated to arrive at definite conclusions with regard to any little plot which the lady might be hatching in connection with her brother and her (temporarily) dearest friend than he himself could possibly be but, all the same, he was forced to own that he had not been able to detect any marked signs of a cabal between Mrs. Panter and her brother for the enmeshing of Biddy and, incidentally, her worldly goods. As far as John had been in a position to notice Reggie Franklin had behaved to his hostess with no more than the ordinary politeness expected of a guest who is on fairly intimate terms with the mistress of the house where he is being entertained.

Of course, as Miss Bellamy had pointed out, it was hardly to be supposed that the pair would behave too patently like the orthodox stage villain and adventuress in a cheap melodrama, but even without that there would surely have been some slight indication that Mr. Franklin had hopes in that direction if such had been the case. The swain who, rightly or wrongly, considers himself the favoured one generally anticipates the future by adopting a proprietorial attitude towards the object of his desires, and John certainly had failed to observe anything of the kind in the attitude of Mrs. Panter's brother towards Biddy.

As for Sir Charles, he was merely an addle-pated and

rather impertinent youth who would be all the better for a good sound spanking but, apart from that, there appeared to be nothing in him, good, bad, or indifferent. John dismissed him summarily from his thoughts as not being worth thinking about.

And he himself was cast for the uninteresting part of "landmark," John recollected with misgiving, tossing from side to side in his bed which seemed with each passing moment to grow hotter and harder. He wasn't at all sure if he cared for it. It somehow sounded so stodgy and dull.

Landmarks were things which went on for years and years without change until they were swept away and it wasn't till then that people realised they *were* landmarks.

As a matter of fact John had not slept quite so badly as he imagined. No one ever does pass quite such a bad night as he thinks he has. The poor sleeper, like the golfer and the fisherman, always allows himself a certain latitude when recounting his experiences. For two or three hours after he got into bed John had spent the time in alternatingly dozing and waking again to resume his interrupted cogitations, but after that he fell sound asleep and never roused until Mr. Ottoway, who spared his wife's susceptibilities by calling their lodger in the morning (Mrs. Ottoway not "holding with" entering a gentleman's bedroom when the occupant of it was "in bed and asleep" unless he happened to be ill, in which case apparently the sex disqualification was removed), greeted the morn by dropping a boot with a crash on the sloping tin back of the hip-bath which was set out ready, whence it slithered down into the water.

Mr. Ottoway was a thin spare man with a peculiar cone-shaped head sparsely covered with sandy hair, going gray in patches, which hung in a lank fringe from the circular bald spot which marked the apex of the cone. He always reminded John of a liver and white spaniel he had once possessed that he had had to destroy owing to chronic mange. He spent most of his time in passing from one paroxysm of surprise to another and the most ordinary hap-

penings of life reduced him to a state of amazed wonder.

When, for instance, Mrs. Ottoway's niece, Jane, married a young man whom she had known from childhood and by whom she had been courted for years, Mr. Ottoway was speechless with astonishment and when, in due and proper course, an infant arrived upon the scenes, he was so taken aback by the unexpectedness of the event, despite the whispered confabulations of the ladies of his family on the subject and the fact that his wife employed her evenings in stitching at diminutive garments, that, on seeing his great-niece for the first time, he apostrophized her as " you little surprise packet," to the indignation of her parents who objected, very naturally, to the inference.

He would insist on regaling John with little anecdotes culled from the papers which he usually prefaced with some such remark as " I was readin' of a 'ighly 'umorous incident which 'appened at a funeral the other day " or " Did you come across that sad accident that occurred at a weddin' lately?"

He was, by profession, a porter at a furniture depository but at seven o'clock each morning, unless John had gone to an early service, usurped the duties of a valet and appeared in his room laden with cans of hot water and suits of clothes and boots, all of which he deposited in a confused heap on the floor, as if he had just removed them out of a pantechnicon, before proceeding to sort them out and put them in their proper places.

When therefore he loosened the finger and thumb between which he was carrying the pair of boots and they, obeying the dictates of the law of gravity, fell earthwards, the one, as has already been stated, into the bath and the other on to his best corn, he was extremely surprised.

" Well, there to be sure!" he exclaimed in accents of acute wonder. " 'Owever did that come to 'appen?"

John sat up in bed and watched him while he carefully placed the rest of the things he was carrying, including the can of hot water, out of harm's way on the top of the

chest of drawers, after which he proceeded gingerly to fish the boot out of the bath and hold it upside down over it to drip black drips back into the water.

"I've had a rotten night, Ottoway," John observed, with that touch of self-importance which so often accompanies the statement.

"Dear, dear! 'Ave you indeed, Sir?" replied Mr. Ottoway, giving the boot a little shake to hasten the dripping process. He didn't appear to be greatly impressed with the news and evidently considered that the accident to the boot had first claim upon his attention.

"I never slept a wink till three," John persisted, stung to exaggeration by Mr. Ottoway's seeming indifference to his tale of woe.

"Is that so, Sir?" said Mr. Ottoway politely, giving the boot a final shake. "I'll take this down to dry at the fire, Sir. It ain't no manner of use cleanin' it again while wet. You'll 'ave to wear another pair."

"Three," repeated John firmly, determined not to forego his claim on Mr. Ottoway's sympathy, however unwilling the other might be to tender it.

His makeshift valet, having dealt with the problem on hand to his own satisfaction, felt himself at liberty to lend a more or less ready ear to John's plaints.

"You never rightly know what you're eatin' and drinkin' at the West End eatin' 'ouses. It's a touch o' liver I dessay," he remarked consolingly. "There was a case I was readin' in the paper a few weeks back (perraps you saw it, Sir?), where a party was lunchin' at a restorong in the city and they 'ad oysters and ——"

"It's *not* liver," John interrupted him ruthlessly. To lie awake from the sentiments evoked by meeting again, unexpectedly and after the lapse of years, his first love and then to have it attributed to eating oysters (in May, too!) was more than he could bear without protest.

"Besides oysters don't upset your liver," he went on doggedly. "They give you typhoid."

"And a nasty disease that is," said Mr. Ottoway cheerfully. "I'd a deal sooner 'ave my liver upset. There! If I 'aven't gone and left your can of hot water on the chest. Your bath looks a bit dirty, Sir," he continued affably, fetching the can and pouring the hot water in, "but I dessay the blacking won't come off on you," he added hopefully.

The effects of his unsatisfactory night had passed off by the time John had dressed and had his breakfast. It was so unusual for him not to fall asleep the minute his head touched the pillow that the occurrence had really rather worried him. Like most thoroughly healthy people he resented the slightest divergence from the ordinary physical routine as something reflecting on his moral character, something to be ashamed of, although, inconsistently enough, he had taken Mr. Ottoway into his confidence in this case; but that had been done in a spirit of bravado, much as a small boy brags to an older companion of some delinquency he has committed in the hopes that it will raise him in the estimation of his senior. It gave him, too, a certain feeling of importance in his own eyes and, if he could only have traced the connection, was probably a subtle form of protest against tamely submitting to play the unimportant rôle of "landmark," though he did not recognise it as such and would have scouted the idea if it had been suggested to him.

At a quarter to ten, just as he was preparing to start for Matins, a daily part of his duties, a knock sounded at the front door and a minute later Mrs. Ottoway appeared bearing a telegram.

Mrs. Ottoway disapproved of telegrams on principle, not so much because they might, and occasionally did, bring bad news, as because of the expense involved in sending them. She was also of the opinion that it gave an opportunity to the post office officials to gossip about the private affairs of other people and she even went so far as to attribute the loss of a parcel, the dispatch of which she

had been advised of by wire, to a leakage in this quarter.

Therefore she let it be clearly seen by her ostentatious air of aloofness, as she handed the missive to John, that she was no party to it and entirely dissociated herself with whatever news it might contain.

"The boy is waiting," was the sole remark she permitted herself to make on the subject and while John tore open the envelope she gazed abstractedly straight in front of her in stony silence lest, by word or look, she should be suspected of any display of interest in its contents.

"Coming to see you four-thirty. Please be in. Very important business. Biddy," ran the message which John read with some amusement. It was typical of the old Biddy he had known to take it for granted that there was no question of anything being allowed to interfere with her plans and that everybody would fall in with them at whatever personal inconvenience to themselves and she evidently had the vaguest ideas as to the multifarious duties of a clergyman or the calls upon his time.

He picked up the engagement book lying at his elbow and turned to the date. As it happened there was nothing he could not put off and he shut it again with a feeling of relief. He would have hated to refuse Biddy anything.

"There's no answer," he said, and Mrs. Ottoway permitted herself a smile of gratification. She had a vague idea that if the boy was returned "empty" so to speak, the postal authorities would, somehow or other, be scored off.

She was on her way out to dismiss the messenger when John called after her.

"Wait a jiffy," he said. "Perhaps I'd better send a wire."

Mrs. Ottoway's face fell. The mocking laugh of a triumphant Postmaster General sounded in her ears and a vision of the young person with bobbed hair who, like a rabbit in its hutch, coldly regarded the outside world through a network of wire at the neighbouring post office, rose before her eyes. Only last week the young person in

question had proved Mrs. Ottoway to be at fault on the subject of the right amount of change due to her after a stamp transaction, and that, too, in front of Mrs. Willard who lived at No. 25 just opposite, and whom Mrs. Ottoway was inclined to patronise.

However it was not her province to interfere. She had merely conveyed the telegram to John because it was her duty to do so and, if needs must, she would carry the answer to the boy outside in the same spirit of detachment.

So she waited while John rapidly pencilled a reply, saying he would expect Biddy at the time named and, when it was delivered over to her care, Mrs. Ottoway, holding it carefully away from contact with her apron as if it were something that might infect her if she didn't take precautionary measures, departed.

It must be confessed that John's thoughts were a little inclined to wander during Matins. He had only parted from Biddy at eight o'clock the previous evening and already she was demanding an interview on "business." What business could possibly have cropped up in so short an interval? Could it have any connection with the house at Porth Ros about which she had told Miss Bellamy? If so, that lady had not let the grass grow under her feet. But it couldn't be that. Miss Bellamy had to see the doctor before she could take any further steps to forward the plot that had been concocted for the good of Biddy's soul. It was a useless waste of time to try and guess at the reason for her descent upon Eddis Street, but all the same John wasted quite a considerable portion of his which might have been better employed. It was very reprehensible, no doubt, that Biddy and her affairs should have been permitted to obtrude themselves upon the Order for Morning Prayer but the unfortunate fact remained that so it was and if, in the Litany which followed, John was within an ace of substituting her name for that of the Queen-Mother, nobody in the congregation was any the wiser. It rested entirely between himself and his own conscience.

All the rest of the morning and all the time he was eating his frugal lunch John, at frequent intervals, pondered over what Biddy's reason could be in tearing down helter-skelter to the East End, a part of London he was sure she had never been to before in her life. It must be business of a very imperative nature that necessitated such immediate consultation.

However, it was no earthly good cudgelling his brains to find an answer to the riddle. To do so was about as much use as to pore over the unknown handwriting on an envelope in the hopes of discovering the signature at the end of the letter inside.

In the afternoon he went out to pay some visits, taking a circuitous route to where he was bound for in order that he might pass the watchmaker's in Inman Road and compare his watch with the clock in Pole's window which professed to give the correct Greenwich time, and all through the harrowing description of the late Mr. Free's last illness as narrated by his disconsolate widow and in the midst of suitable comments on the deplorable state of old Mrs. Luard's bad legs as graphically described by herself with all the horrid details, he kept one eye on the time in order that he might not be late and make Biddy wait.

He arrived back in Eddis Street bearing a confectioner's bag with an assortment in it of the least uninteresting cakes he was able to run to earth, horrid doubts assailing him as to whether the young lady behind the counter was not stretching a point when she assured him they were fresh that morning. The one at which he had surreptitiously poked a forefinger, when her back was turned for a second, had certainly shown no signs of yielding to the touch, but not being positive whether it was intended to be hard or soft he had not had the courage to criticise, but accepted her word meekly. He had broken the news to Mrs. Ottoway that he was expecting a lady to tea, and when he walked into his sitting room she was just completing the preparations by setting, in the middle of the table, a perfectly

hideous china vase of turquoise blue encircled by arsenic-green leaves which stood out in bas-relief and were intended to represent a wreath of ivy. Into this, as a concession to John's lamentable weakness for flowers and because it was a special occasion, she had tightly crammed a bunch of wall-flowers and she was surveying the result with an air in which pride and a consciousness that she was acting against her better judgment by encouraging her lodger's idiosyncracies were inextricably blended.

She was breathing heavily with excitement and with every breath her stays creaked audibly until it seemed almost equal chances whether or no they would stand the strain put upon them.

"My niece sent 'em up from the country," she explained apologetically directly she caught sight of John. "I 'ad to litter 'em somewhere and I knew you 'ad a leaning towards flowers."

She spoke as one unwilling to be too hard on the short-comings of a weaker brother, and John accepted the implied rebuke with becoming humility.

"They're lovely. Thanks awfully," he said.

"You'll be setting up for yourself in the country soon, I dessay," said Mrs. Ottoway, speaking rather as though John were in the grocery line and there was a likelihood of his purchasing the good-will of the general stores in some country village.

"What on earth do you mean?" he enquired in bewilderment.

Mrs. Ottoway smiled diffidently.

"When you're married," she ventured.

"But I'm not going to be married," John declared.

"Ah!" said Mrs. Ottoway impressively. "There's many a young man talks big the same as you and thinks to escape out of the snare of the fowler but a bird in the 'and don't raise so much as a chirrup, as well I know, being married myself. It's gone half-past four, Sir. The lady'll be here soon."

John gasped as though a bucket of cold water had been thrown over him and then, to his intense annoyance, realised that his face was crimson as the purport of Mrs. Ottoway's speech reached his brain. She had, it was evident, already arranged a marriage between him and Biddy and from the fact that the lady had, barefacedly, telegraphed to the gentleman announcing her intention of paying him a visit, had determined in her own mind that the gentleman was the hunted and not the hunter.

John tried hard to feel indignant but somehow, when he came to analyze it, the suggestion, in spite of its palpable absurdity, was not without its attractive side. It was so ridiculous and so obviously remote from the truth that he could afford to let his imagination run riot a little and he played lightly with the fancy of what his sensations would be now if it were really as Mrs. Ottoway had hinted (only with the positions reversed, of course) and if his intention was to put it to the touch this very afternoon.

Once again he experienced that odd tickling sensation in the region of his top waistcoat button and he hurriedly pulled himself together. Good heavens! Wherever was he letting his thoughts carry him? He was a landmark. He must remember that. Landmarks didn't give the rein to their imaginations in this way. He must instantly disabuse Mrs. Ottoway of her sentimental notion.

"*Mrs.* Rycroft is an old friend of mine," he said, with an emphasis on the first word. He supposed the emphasis reduced the perfectly truthful remark to the low level of a white lie, but he was too desperate to stop to thresh the matter out with his conscience at present. That must come later, if necessary. Meanwhile he must hope for the best.

He was pleased to see Mrs. Ottoway's jaw drop, as far as her congestion of chins would allow it to do such a thing.

"Oh, 'Mrs.', is she?" she exclaimed, in disappointed tones, but she brightened up the next second. "But 'er 'usband isn't coming with 'er?" she wound up.

"Great Scott! I should hope not!" John almost shouted,

then, suddenly recollecting that the statement might be open to misconstruction, made Biddy's exact status clear.

"She's a widow," he informed Mrs. Ottoway.

"Oh!" she ejaculated, with a wealth of hidden meaning in her voice, "one o' them war-widows, I dessay?"

"No," John answered curtly. "Colonel Rycroft was over sixty when war broke out."

It was at this precise moment that Biddy's car went slowly by the window and stopped at the door, with Biddy herself, looking young and radiant, seated in it.

"Oh! Over sixty, was he?" observed Mrs. Ottoway reflectively.

CHAPTER VII

"Well, John, I've not been long in coming to tea with Mrs. Grundy, have I?" Biddy said, as the person addressed opened the front door for her, having beaten Mrs. Ottoway in the race there by a good length and a half.

"Mrs. Grundy's delighted to see you," John replied. "Come along in and be introduced. I don't believe you've met her before."

He was painfully conscious of his landlady's presence in the immediate background, as evidenced by her heavy breathing to the accompaniment of the creaking stays, and he knew, too, that she was taking in every detail of the scene being enacted before her eyes and drawing totally wrong conclusions therefrom, so he hurried Biddy into the sitting room and hastily closed the door, a proceeding which only served to confirm Mrs. Ottoway's suspicions.

"What a funny little room!" Biddy said, with more truth than politeness, when she had seated herself. "Is this where you work?"

"I do some of my work here. For instance, this is where I prepare those eloquent sermons of which you had a sample last night."

"I know." Biddy's eyes twinkled. "I love Mrs. Grundy, her coat is so warm."

"And if I don't hurt her she'll do me *no* harm," John, greatly daring, finished the quotation in a very fair imitation of the sing-song voice in which Mrs. Panter had delivered it the evening before and was rather relieved when Biddy laughed. He had been a tiny bit afraid lest she might take offence.

"Well, I haven't hurt her," she said defiantly.

"Then she'll do you no harm," John remarked with aplomb. "Is the business you mentioned in your wire any-

thing to do with her, Biddy?" For it suddenly struck him that there might be some connection between the abrupt sentence hurled at his head and her visit to Eddis Street this afternoon, though where it came in he could not for the life of him see.

Biddy considered the question.

"I suppose in a way it has," she answered thoughtfully.

There was a pause while John waited for her to go on.

"You must meet lots of failures, John," she said at length, with apparent irrelevance.

"No man — or woman — is a failure till he gives up trying. That's not my dictum, Biddy. A larger-hearted man than I shall ever be said it. There are failures, of course; there are those who have just let go of everything and are too tired, too out of heart, to try any longer. They're stripped and left for dead at the roadside and no good Samaritan journeys by and has compassion on them or binds up their wounds and so they just lie there, untended, until they die like a dog in a ditch."

"I'm glad you feel like that, John," Biddy said simply. "Because — "

She broke off what she had been going to say and hesitated.

"Because what, Biddy?" asked John encouragingly.

"Because last night I met somebody who — who'll die like a dog in a ditch if his wounds aren't bound up," Biddy said with a rush.

"Yes?"

"That's why I came to you."

John looked at her curiously.

"Why to me?"

"Because you're so — so understanding. *You* wouldn't judge your fellowmen from appearances only. You would never think that because a man is down and out he's not worth trying to save. Because a man has gone under through no fault of his own, *you* wouldn't condemn him unheard, would you?"

"I hope I'd never have so much impertinence, Biddy. 'But for the grace of God, there go I'."

"But I don't quite see where Mrs. Grundy comes in," he added as an afterthought.

"She doesn't come in, that's my difficulty," said Biddy with a grimace.

"You see she wasn't there to chaperone me when I — journeyed by, and — and it was rather an unconventional time at which to be binding up the wounds of an entirely strange young man."

"What time was it?" enquired John.

"It was four o'clock in the morning, John," Biddy replied in a still, small voice.

"Four o'clock in the morning!" repeated John in considerable surprise.

"Yes, John," said Biddy.

John, who up till now had been standing, sat down with some promptitude.

"Look here, you'd better tell me all about it," he said, leaning forward till his face was on a level with hers.

So Biddy told him all about it. She told him how Roger Dibden had knocked on her door, how she had rescued him from the clutches of the law and brought him in and given him food and drink, how he had restored her lost property, and, finally, she recounted his history and the events which had landed him in his present straits.

John listened in silence until she had ended the recital. Once or twice he had made as though to speak but each time he checked himself and waited for her to finish before he made any comments. It was not until the peroration that he even permitted himself a change of countenance and then that was only because it was so characteristic.

"And what's more," Biddy challenged him, "I'd do it again under the same circumstances."

"I've no doubt you would," John agreed. "But seriously, Biddy, putting convention on one side (I'm no conventionalist you know), wasn't it rather a dangerous experi-

ment? It turned out all right as it happened, but supposing your visitor had seized the opportunity to bash you over the head with the fire-irons and decamp with your silver? I'm afraid that at the subsequent trial you'd have got scant sympathy from judge and jury!"

"But then, you see, he wasn't just an ordinary tramp," expostulated Biddy. "He was a gentleman."

John shook his head.

"Ah, Biddy," he said with a sigh, "if you only knew how many hundreds there are, in London alone, who began life as gentlemen. I could tell you of men within a stone's throw of this very room in which we're sitting, well-born, well-connected, with relations whose names are famous wherever the English language is spoken, who started with every advantage that position and wealth can give and who have sold their birthright for a mess of pottage and, having done so, have sunk deeper and deeper into the mire until there's no vice in which they have not steeped themselves, no crime too dastardly for them to shrink from committing. Pride of birth, honour, love, self-respect, all have gone into the melting-pot. Their gentility is part of their stock in trade. They use it as a cloak to cover the nakedness of their souls. What proof have you that your protégé is not one of these?"

"All the proof I want," flashed out Biddy. "If Mr. Dibden had been one of the sort of people you've been talking about he wouldn't have taken the trouble to return my pendant. John, why are you going back on your own words like this? He's not a failure yet, but he very soon will be if — if we don't tend him. He refused my help last night. He wouldn't have done that if he'd been a fraud. Oh, do believe he isn't! Do, John!"

There were tears in her eyes as she made her appeal and John was stirred by her earnestness, but he knew the underworld better than Biddy did and though the return of the pendant might be a proof of this stranger's honesty, it might equally be a trap of some sort. At the same time he

shrank from the responsibility of condemning this man, whom Biddy championed so stoutly, as a trickster, without further evidence. To assume too readily that he was outside the pale was to run the risk of putting him there, whereas, if it were a genuine case, a helping hand held out at the crucial moment might save a soul alive.

"I could judge so much better if I could only see him," he said, in bewilderment.

"But you're going to see him!" exclaimed Biddy, forgetting, in the stress of excitement, that she had quite omitted to warn John of the compact she had made with her last night's visitor.

"Oh, am I?" remarked the mystified John.

"Why, of *course* you are. Didn't I tell you?"

"You certainly did not," he informed her.

"I arranged for him to be here at five. You don't mind, do you?"

"I'll be delighted to receive him — if he comes," John observed a trifle grimly.

"He'll come right enough," Biddy declared with conviction.

"Why this certainty?" enquired John.

A dimple appeared in Biddy's cheek to be instantly suppressed.

"Why did Adam eat the apple, John?" she asked, countering his question with another.

"Because the woman — Biddy, you — you little —"

"Devil," prompted Biddy. "Do say it, John. It sounds so friendly."

"All right. Devil, then," said John, goaded to desperation.

"Thank you, John," Biddy said gratefully. "It's like old times to hear it."

"Biddy! I never called you — that, in old times," exclaimed John in horror.

"Oh, no, I was thinking of James," said Biddy absently.

"Who the — Who is James?" demanded John fiercely.

"My husband, John," answered Biddy demurely. "He suffered a good deal from gout. I am given to understand that under those painful circumstances bad language is quite permissible. Do you suffer from gout, John?"

"No. I do *not*," John almost shouted.

"I was only trying to find excuses for you," said Biddy in hurt tones. "A parson's choice of suitable expressions in times of trouble is so circumscribed, isn't it? One dear old parson I knew told me that, whenever anything happened to upset him, he always locked himself into his study and ready the commination service out loud."

"You are the limit, Biddy. My mentality isn't equal to the strain of keeping pace with you. I thought we were in the middle of a serious conversation," John said.

"I thought we'd finished it, for the present," returned Biddy. "We've said all there is to be said until Mr. Dibden comes."

"And here he is," she added, as a ring sounded at the front door bell. "Apologize!"

They listened breathlessly as they heard Mrs. Ottoway's ponderous footsteps pass along the passage outside.

From the dialogue which ensued the new arrival didn't appear to be having a very cordial reception.

"Is this where Mr. Ffoulkes lives?" This in a man's voice.

"Yes." This somewhat curtly from Mrs. Ottoway.

"Can I see him, please?"

"Well, you can't at present. 'E's very particular engaged."

"Oh! Is he likely to be disengaged soon?"

"Not for some time."

"I'd better go to the rescue," John said, and getting up he went out hurriedly.

"Is that Mr. Dibden?" he asked when he reached the passage.

Mrs. Ottoway revolved slowly on her axis.

"I can't say, I'm sure," she said loftily. She was a little put out that John should choose the exact minute to appear in which she was denying access to him.

"You are Mr. Dibden, aren't you?" he enquired, addressing himself to the top of his visitor's head which was the only portion of him visible behind Mrs. Ottoway's bulky form.

That lady, feeling that the matter had been taken summarily out of her hands, executed a flank movement which propelled John into the umbrella stand and retired hurt to the back regions to assist the kettle to boil. Never again would she waste her time in building romances, she determined, as she heard her lodger invite the seedy-looking young man to come in, after he had allowed that he was Mr. Dibden.

"Bring an extra cup, will you, Mrs. Ottoway," were the last words that reached her ears as she shut herself into the kitchen, alone with her shattered dreams.

"I'm sorry I'm late — Sir," Roger said as he stepped into the narrow hall. "It took me longer getting here than I thought it would."

John noticed the slight hesitancy over the mode of address and guessed that it cost some effort on his guest's part to acknowledge thus openly the superior position of one whom, but for force of circumstances, he would have met as an equal. He judged Roger Dibden to be a few years his junior but the slight difference in age was certainly not sufficient to justify the younger man addressing the older as "Sir," although in the army, it is true, he had known cases where a middle-aged lieutenant with hair going gray had been under the painful necessity of thus marking the subordinacy of his rank to that of a youthful major who had been in his cradle at the time when his "junior" was already worshipping Letty Lind from the front row of the stalls.

Still, the army was the army and had manners and customs of its own. Civilian life was different. In civilian life

there weren't the same anomalies of rank as in the army in war-time.

This man was either a gentleman or he was not and, if he was, that touch of servility must be checked, otherwise it would spread and spread until it ceased to be a mark of respect and grew to be a grovelling submission to any power which might choose to exercise its authority. If he was to be rescued from the maelstrom into which he had slipped he must hold up his head above the swirling waters, even if he could feel no solid ground beneath his feet.

John summed up the situation rapidly. He realised that at the faintest suspicion of patronage Roger would withdraw into his shell and that no power on earth would dislodge him. The only hope lay in trying to make him believe he was conferring a favour and not accepting one. He must be treated as a client, not a suppliant. Therefore,

"It's awfully nice of you to want my advice," John said, skillfully steering between the unnatural heartiness of the parson who wants to make it perfectly clear that he is no respecter of persons, and the lofty condescension of the individual who, seeing a worm in his path, steps aside to avoid treading on it.

"Not, I'm afraid, that it's worth much," he added.

"It's awfully good of you to let me come and bother you," Roger returned, not quite able to keep the surprise he felt out of his voice. He had so thoroughly made up his mind that he was to be disposed of and arranged for without his own wishes being consulted and had determined beforehand to resist being bullied or cajoled into any schemes for his social regeneration which smacked in the slightest degree of a self-constituted divine right on the part of this unknown parson to dictate to him, that it rather took the wind out of his sails to find that he was considered eligible to bear a part in the management of his own affairs.

"Oh, that's all right," John said easily. "Come along in

and have some tea. It'll be ready in a minute. Mrs. Rycroft's here."

"Mrs. Rycroft? Is — is that the lady I — I saw last night?"

It was John's turn to be surprised.

"Didn't you know her name?" he asked.

Roger shook his head.

"No," he said simply.

"But didn't you ask?"

"No," he said again. "You see I thought she'd tell me if she wanted me to know it. The circumstances were a little out of the ordinary, weren't they? It wouldn't have been altogether surprising if she had preferred to leave me in ignorance."

There was no hint of mock modesty in his manner of saying this. He just stated a plain fact, that was all, and John liked him for it. There couldn't be much amiss with him if he was still able to display feelings of chivalry towards a woman.

John began to think that Biddy's estimate of him had, after all, been right, and it was with more confidence than he had expected that he ushered him into the room where she was.

It pleased him, too, to observe that, though he showed a little natural embarrassment when Biddy held out her hand to him, there was no gaucherie discernible in Roger's bearing as he took it in his. As far as outward signs went it might have been just an ordinary social gathering with nothing in the background to mark it as being, possibly, the turning point in a man's career.

Even the condition of his clothes didn't appear, on the surface at any rate, to ruffle Roger's composure although John guessed that he was conscious of it, for, when he invited him to sit down, he carefully chose a seat where he could hide the gaping hole in his boot under the table.

Mrs. Ottoway, when she brought in the tea, gave surreptitious glances at the incongruous group gathered round

the empty fireplace and vainly endeavoured to reconcile them with one another. She was not unaccustomed to John introducing strange visitors into the apartment and giving them tea, and she could understand his entertaining somebody like Mrs. Rycroft, albeit this was the first occasion on which he had done so, but that he should combine the two opposite extremes into one party was utterly beyond her comprehension. She didn't *hold* with it.

During the meal which followed, the conversation was carried on in that staccato and jerky manner which betokens abstraction and a desire to delay, as long as possible, the awkward moment which everybody knows to be looming ahead.

They agreed on the unusual warmth of the weather for May, which was so obvious that no one could have disagreed about it; they discussed the political situation, of which they were all equally ignorant; they touched, in a half-hearted manner, on the merits and demerits of summertime and whether it really did affect the health of children which, as none of them had any, was a work of supererogation; and, finally, though how they arrived there was a mystery, they found themselves involved in a discussion on the great advance made in medical science in the last few years which landed them in such inextricable confusion that they sought refuge in silence.

It was not until they had finished tea that Biddy took the plunge and ventured to broach the subject which up to now they had all shied at.

"Well, we aren't getting much forrarder, are we?" she observed suddenly, with startling abruptness.

"You mean about — " John began flounderingly, then stopped. With the object of their solicitude sitting there under their very noses it seemed almost an impertinence to discuss the case and yet it had to be done, he knew, although it was painfully reminiscent of two doctor's holding a consultation over the bed of their patient and going into minute and harrowing details of his symptoms regard-

less of his feelings. It was necessary, of course. The patient's pulse had to be taken, his temperature noted, intimate questions asked which he alone was able to answer, before any decision could be reached as to the measures to be adopted to bring relief to the sufferer.

And what if the patient in this case refused to be treated?

From the sudden set of Roger's jaw at Biddy's remark it struck John that this was a factor to be reckoned with.

If Biddy had been a man, or even an elderly woman, instead of a young and attractive one, the position would have been less complicated, but, as it was, the difficulties to be got over were tremendous and John foresaw that a good deal of tact and patience would be needed to persuade Roger to accept tangible help.

In a way he sympathised with him. As far as he had been able to judge from the very little superficial knowledge he had of him, Roger Dibden appeared still to possess more than a modicum of the pride of youth for which so small allowance is made in this world. People are apt to forget how hard they found it themselves to own up that the trumpet they expended so much breath upon, in order that a suitable flourish should herald their entrance into the arena, has proved to be nothing but sounding brass. They deliberately blot out from their memories the days when they regarded the world as a football to be kicked hither and thither as it pleased them and, from a coign of vantage, watch their successors carrying on the game and applaud vigorously when the tables are turned on those who have taken their places in the field, and the world retaliates.

That he had judged rightly was plain for it was Roger who spoke up.

"I — I tried to explain to Mrs. Rycroft last night how impossible it was that — that I could sponge on her," he said stubbornly. "I should be sorry if a — a common act of courtesy should be construed into a subtle appeal for — for help. Perhaps, no doubt I did act foolishly in not restor-

ing her pendant more promptly and I deeply regret having placed her in — in an invidious position, but that I should consider myself to have any claim upon her for restoring it is unthinkable. I only came here this afternoon because I felt I owed it to Mrs. Rycroft, after her extreme kindness to me last night, to accede to her request. If you'll excuse me I'll go now."

He got up as he finished speaking and, picking up his cap, turned towards the door.

John got up, too, and laid a detaining hand on his arm. He guessed that it was of set purpose that the other man had forestalled discussion, that he had broken up the self-constituted committee of ways and means before it had even begun to sit and he admired him for his courage in so doing, but it couldn't be allowed to end there. The reed was bruised, but not broken. The flax was smoking, but not yet quenched. His would be the fault if the reed got broken and the flax was quenched because, when he had the chance, he had let them go untended.

" Don't be a silly ass," he said. " Sit down."

Considering John had had to speak on the spur of the moment, he had calculated the effect of his surprising words to a nicety.

Paradoxical as it may sound, a man doesn't address another man as a " silly ass " unless he is friendly disposed towards him. If John had accosted Roger as " Mr Dibden " or " Dibden " or, worse still, as " my friend " it would not have had half the arresting influence of that " silly ass."

The " silly ass " allowed John to put him back into the chair he had just vacated without a word of protest and, from that moment, John felt he had the matter well in hand.

" Did you ever hear Canning's lines in ' New Morality ' on a candid friend?" he asked with apparent irrelevance.

" No, I didn't, at least to my knowledge," Biddy, to whom the question was addressed, answered somewhat shortly. She was a little breathless from Roger's unexpected behavior. " I suppose it means you're going to be nasty."

"'But of all plagues, good heaven, thy wrath can send,
Save, save, Oh, save me from a candid friend'," quoted John solemnly.

"Then you are going to be nasty," said Biddy.

"I'm going to be candid," rejoined John.

"It's the same thing. Well, what is it?" asked Biddy.

"I'm going to ask you to leave Mr. Dibden and myself to talk this matter over alone."

"You're not very polite, I must say, turning me out neck and crop! You evidently share the general masculine opinion of women. The hand that rocks the cradle upsets the apple-cart," Biddy said, feigning indignation but, at the same time, collecting together her various feminine impedimenta.

Roger sprang to his feet again in a state of great mental perturbation.

"I won't hear of it, Mrs. Rycroft!" he declared. "You mustn't go on my account, please."

He glared at John with an indignation that was not at all feigned, and the latter, groaning inwardly, felt a strong inclination to shake Biddy for her want of tact. Possibly she, too, realised her mistake for she said hastily:

"All the same, Mr. Ffoulkes is quite right, Mr. Dibden. You'll be able to talk much more comfortably if I'm not here. I'm not really offended so easily as all that," she said, rising from her chair as she spoke and holding out her hand. "We shall meet again."

"I'm afraid that's not very likely," Roger observed stiffly. He had a feeling that, against his will, he was being forced into the very position he had determined to steer clear of, that, one by one, his defences were being beaten down, but he wouldn't give up without a struggle. It was that feeling which accounted for his lack of cordiality. It was impossible that he should let her go away with the impression that he had already capitulated. That strain of dogged obstinacy, which even his misfortunes had not succeeded in altogether obliterating, forbade his surrender as

long as there was a shot left in his locker, and to allow her last remark to pass unchallenged was to acknowledge defeat already.

Perhaps Biddy had some inkling of what was floating in his mind for she didn't appear in the least abashed by the chilly reception accorded to her friendly overtures.

"The unlikely often happens," she said lightly. "Let's hope it will in this case. Good-bye, and — good luck."

And with that she was gone leaving Roger staring at the door through which she had vanished and cursing, inconsequently enough, that absurd pride which stood between him and the fulfillment of his desires. For that he *did* desire all the things which might be his, if he chose to accept them from the hands of a woman, he did not hide from himself. To deny himself this friendship was to deny himself the very necessities of life, food, clothing, a roof to cover his homeless head, and yet the one was impossible without the others. He laughed a little bitterly at the picture he conjured up in his mind's eye of himself, as he now was, marching up and ringing the front door bell of Biddy's house and demanding to know of the affronted servant who answered it, if "Mrs. Rycroft was at home?" He'd quickly be sent off with a flea in his ear!

Meanwhile, John, who was seeing Biddy out to her waiting car, was endeavouring to get her to look at the matter from the same point of view.

"Did you ever know anybody so stubborn?" she had said, when the door was closed behind them.

"In a way I see his difficulties," John replied thoughtfully.

"I don't. What are they?" demanded Biddy.

"Trousers, mostly," said John, with disconcerting bluntness. "Any young man with an atom of self-respect is diffident about accepting such things from a lady. Very foolish, no doubt, but there it is."

"Oh!" Biddy's face fell.

"I never thought of that," she said in awe-struck tones. "I just thought *beyond*, of finding him a job. Of course

he'll need clothes and things. How can it be managed? Do think of something, John."

John was thinking of something. He was thinking of a new gray flannel suit lying folded in a drawer upstairs waiting for the summer holidays and he gave a tiny sigh of regret as he realised that it must be cast off (before it was ever on) in the interests of Mr. Roger Dibden.

"I'll manage something," he said valiantly.

"There'll be food and lodging as well," almost wailed Biddy. "Do you think that, without impropriety, I might offer to defray the cost of those items until something turns up?"

John pondered for a few moments.

"I wouldn't, Biddy," he said at length. "Don't spoil the ship for a hap'orth of tar. Our young friend's a little inclined to be on his hind legs already. We've got to go carefully with him, else we'll frighten him away. Now, look here. There's a small room in this house next to mine. How would it be if I could persuade him to come here as my guest until we can see where we are? He may climb down from his pedestal later on!"

"Of course that would be ideal," said Biddy, then added doubtfully, "but it seems so unfair."

"What does?" asked John.

"To land you with all the trouble and — and expense," she replied.

"The only trouble may be with my landlady," John assured her. "But I think I can manage her all right. As for the expense, I'll arrange for him to be my P. G. and he can pay me back when that job comes along. It's not that I grudge the money, Biddy, but I think he's more likely to fall in with that plan than any other."

"John, you're an angel," Biddy said. "But I mustn't keep you talking out here any longer or he may suspect we're plotting. Write and let me know how things pan out, or, better still, come and see me."

They were outside on the pavement by this time, where

the distracted Rands was busily employed in guarding his precious car from the grubby, inquisitive fingers of a crowd of children who seemed bent on leaving their imprints on the varnished paint. He welcomed his mistress with obvious relief, and hardly waited for her to be settled before he started the engine and was off.

"And bring Mr. Dibden with you," Biddy called out as she was hurried away from the scene.

It must be confessed that John, when he returned to his remaining guest, felt unaccountably shy. He was accustomed to dealing with all sorts and conditions of men but never, in all his experience, had he been confronted with quite such a complex case as this promised to be and, because he didn't altogether know how to tackle it, an unwonted nervousness took possession of him.

"Have a cigarette?" he said, falling back upon the customary masculine expedient for breaking the ice.

"Thanks."

Roger took a cigarette from the case John held out, and eyed it curiously.

"I've often envied the chaps who could bring themselves to pick up cigarette ends out of the gutter," he said, meditatively. There was no desire to impress his listener by this remark which might so easily have been made to sound theatrical and unreal. He simply stated a fact.

"Has it been as bad as that? Poor old chap!" John said, and, at the unmistakable sympathy in his voice, Roger moved uncomfortably in his chair. Good heavens! Did this parson bloke imagine he was *courting* sympathy? At the same time, with the inconsistency of poor weak humanity, he couldn't help feeling it was rather comforting to have someone commiserating with one, and, though he poured the cold waters of common sense on the tiny spark of gratitude which John's words had kindled in his starved heart, and told himself that they were part of the clerical stock-in-trade, the glow still lingered on and refused to be extinguished.

He lit his cigarette with a hand that, in spite of all his efforts to the contrary, would persist in trembling a little.

"You were in France, weren't you?" John asked, more to gain time than anything else, since Biddy had already told him so.

Roger nodded.

"What regiment?"

Roger told him.

"I met some of the fellows out of the second battalion when I was in hospital," John said. "Let me see. There was Goodchild and Holtum and little Teddy Hawes, and a chap with red hair that the others called The Cherub. I've forgotten his name."

"D'you mean Simpson?" enquired Roger.

"That was it," John said. "Goodchild died in hospital. What happened to the others?"

"Holtum and Teddy Hawes were killed at La Vacquerie in December, 1917. Simpson, I believe, is farming somewhere in Kenya Colony, but I'm not sure," Roger told him. He gave no sign of being aware that John was pumping him even if he suspected it.

"By Jove! It's a blessing that's a thing of the past," John exclaimed.

"Is it? Yes, I suppose it is," Roger answered sardonically. "All the same, it had it's compensations."

"You mean one was — free?" John asked doubtfully, comparing the open life of those days with the cramped existence of today spent among the squalid courts and alleys of a great city.

"I don't. I mean just the opposite," Roger said shortly. "One was a slave but one had a master to look after one. One was a dog, but one had a kennel to sleep in and clean straw to lie upon, and food to eat. Now — " He stopped and shrugged his shoulders expressively. In his vehement outburst he forgot that with every word he was giving himself away and exposing his wounded soul to the public gaze.

John saw his opportunity and was not slow to take

advantage of it. He laid his hand gently on the other man's arm.

"It's up to you," was all he said.

"To drag myself back to respectability by hanging on to the skirts of a woman, you mean," he said roughly. "Thanks. I'm not taking any."

He attempted to pull his arm away but John tightened his grasp on it so that, short of by violence, he could not get loose.

"My dear chap," John said deliberately. "Don't we all hang on to the skirts of some woman or another from the day we first set foot to the ground? Thank God if we happen on one who will drag us to respectability for there are plenty who will do the opposite if we give them half a chance. It's a popular fallacy that woman is dependent on man while man is independent of woman. Why? The very first woman who was created was intended as a help-meet for man. That was her *raison d'etre,* and if the Almighty thought man needed a woman's help I expect there's something in the idea."

In spite of himself Roger grinned.

"That's all very well," he said, "but perhaps you'll kindly remember that in those days there were no sartorial complications. You may be right about all of us hanging on to a woman's skirts, but if the skirt is the latest fashionable cut one needs to be dressed to match in a tail coat and the right kind of bags and to wear a topper on one's head and shove one's hands into lavender kid gloves, before one dares lay hold."

"And one has a natural diffidence about allowing the lady in the fashionable skirt to supply them," John observed dryly.

"Well, wouldn't you have?" Roger demanded with a show of indignation.

"Perhaps I should," John replied, after due consideration, "but I wouldn't throw up the whole bag of tricks for the sake of a pair of trousers."

"What *would* you do then?"

"I'd borrow them from a friend."

"But if you hadn't got one?"

"I'd make one."

"You can't pick friends off the hedge as though they were blackberries."

"All the more reason to accept one when it's offered."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean what's the matter with me?"

Something very like a sob rose up in Roger's throat and he turned away his head so that John should not see his face.

"But you don't know anything about me," he said, bringing out the words with an effort, for he suddenly longed beyond everything to have John for his friend, to have the right to claim his sympathy, to feel that there was one who would lend a willing ear if he unburdened himself of the load of doubts and fears which weighed him down, only it seemed so unfair, so like taking advantage of an offer which perhaps would be regretted when it was too late to draw back.

"How d'you know I'm not a fraud?" he asked, still hesitating.

For answer, John pulled him round so that they were standing, face to face.

"Look me in the eyes," he said, putting his two hands on Roger's shoulders.

For the space of ten seconds the two men stood there like that, staring straight into one another's eyes, then John dropped his hands with a little laugh.

"I'll risk it," he said. "Come. Is it a deal?"

Roger laid an arm along the edge of the mantelpiece and buried his face in the crook of it.

"I'm beat," he said, in muffled tones. "Have it your own way."

CHAPTER VIII

THERE is no doubt that John, in taking Roger's trustworthiness for granted, without waiting to make a closer investigation or verify the truth of his statements, was behaving, as the world at large would have stigmatised it, very foolishly, but his experience of life, as lived in the overcrowded slums of the East End, where he came into contact with all sorts and conditions of men and rubbed shoulders with the riff-raff of a thickly populated parish, had taught him to read his fellow creatures like an open book and, though he did not pretend to be infallible and occasionally was mistaken in his estimate of a character, he was more often right than not.

Those few seconds during which he had looked into Roger's eyes had convinced him that he need have no fear of being let down by him, no man who had evil designs could have returned that penetrating gaze as Roger had done without flinching. No jail-bird could have stood there and submitted to have his soul searched as this ragged, out-at-elbow waif had, without betraying himself. John was satisfied on that score. The trouble would be to force other people to share his satisfaction.

He had no intention, because he himself had faith, of taking no further steps to bolster up Roger's story. It was as necessary for Roger's sake, as for his own and Biddy's, to obtain confirmation of it from an independent source. There must be no blank pages in his history if he were to have a fair start.

But before that could be done there was Mrs. Ottoway to be interviewed. John knew her kind, motherly heart and he had little doubt that, if only he could smuggle Roger into it, ample room would be found there for another "poor lamb," but the situation required careful handling. It was asking a good deal of anybody, as house-proud as

she was, to expect them to shelter a tattered and torn individual who could show no credentials and whom John himself had only taken on trust.

However it had to be gone through and, since it was obviously impossible to discuss the problem in front of the person implicated, he left Roger in possession of the sitting room and sought Mrs. Ottoway in her own domain.

She was busily engaged in stirring something in a saucepan over the fire, a relish, no doubt, for Mr. Ottoway's tea, and she looked up in some surprise, as John came in, at this invasion of her premises, so surprised in fact that she had to reach for her spectacle case from the shelf and adjust her spectacles on her nose to make sure her vision was not playing tricks with her.

"You ain't ill, are you?" she asked anxiously, unable to assign any other reason for her lodger's presence in her kitchen.

"No, I'm not ill," John assured her. "But I'm in a bit of a fix. May I sit down?"

He advanced into the room as he spoke and, without waiting for permission, pulled a chair away from the table and, sitting astride it, folded his arms on the back.

Mrs. Ottoway nodded her head sagely. She flattered herself she knew what was coming without needing to be told.

"Why you 'ad 'im into the sitting room *I* don't know," she said. "I'm sure I did my best to stop it and I should 'ave stopped it, if you 'adn't poked your nose out at the wrong moment. Naturally a lady don't like to sit at table with a tramp, and what you were about to bring things to such a pass is more than I can tell you. Of course you're in a bit of a fix and I don't want my specs to see 'oo's fixed you neither. Went off in a 'uff, did she?"

"Nothing of the kind, Xantippe, my love," declared John beaming at her. "As a matter of fact the lady knew the — er — tramp before I did, and he's not exactly a tramp either."

"And my name ain't exactly San Tippy either. It's plain Sylvia, if you want to know," announced Mrs. Ottoway, brandishing the spoon at him. "My love, indeed! Did you ever hear the like for cheek?"

All the same the "cheek," as she termed it, put Mrs. Ottoway in high good humour as John had intended it should. He knew her weakness for being chaffed and had traded on it to further his own ends. Once get her into a rollicking mood and she was as plastic as wet clay.

"He's a gentleman," went on John imperturbably.

Mrs. Ottoway gave vent to a sound half-way between a laugh and a crow.

"With them boots all in gapes and a patch on the seat of 'is trousers!" she exclaimed, unconvinced. "I don't go about with my eyes shut. I took 'em in."

"It's not the clothes that make the gentleman," observed John sententiously.

"Per'aps not, but it's the want of 'em makes the tramp," responded Mrs. Ottoway with vigour.

"If your theory is correct, I'm a tramp every morning for ten minutes or so when I'm in my bath," John pointed out with some show of logic. "I hope you don't, on that account, object to my presence under your roof?" he added.

"Now, Mr. Ffoulkes, I'm too busy to listen to any more of your nonsense. If you can't talk sense, out of my kitchen you go," said Mrs. Ottoway with determination.

"But you won't listen to sense when I talk it," objected John. "I was beginning to tell you about the fix I'm in only you interrupted."

"Well, talk away then, only you must let me get on with my work while you do. Ottoway'll be in 'ungry for 'is tea at any minute and if it ain't ready 'e'll set to and rampage," said Mrs. Ottoway. "What's this fix I've 'eard so much about?"

"Well, it isn't altogether *my* fix. It's partly Mr. Dibden's," John began warily.

"'Im with the 'oley boots?" enquired Mrs. Ottoway.

"*And* the patch in the — er — seat of his trousers," John reminded her. "You wouldn't like to see Ottoway going out with a patch in the seat of his trousers, would you?"

"'E'd come in a deal quicker than 'e went out if I did see 'im in that state. Not that 'e could though," she reflected. "'E 'asn't got any such a pair."

"And that's because he's got you to look after him. Lucky fellow!" said John.

"Well, so 'ave you, if it comes to that," observed the lucky fellow's wife with a smile of gratification at the compliment.

"But Mr. Dibden hasn't," John remarked meditatively.

Mrs. Ottoway stopped her occupation and, ignoring the risk of the homeward bound Ottoway returning to find his tea not ready and, consequently rampaging, came and stood over John with arms akimbo.

"Now what are you getting at, Mr. Ffoulkes?" she demanded to know.

"Getting at?" asked John, in innocent tones.

"Yes. Getting at," she repeated firmly. "There's something behind all this palaver about Ottoway's trousers and what-not. What is it?"

"I've told you. It's this fix I'm in about Mr. Dibden," said John. "You see, he was an officer in the war — " he paused impressively, and Mrs. Ottoway pricked up her ears at the word "officer," which was precisely the effect John intended it to have. He was perfectly aware that now she would never rest until she had gleaned every detail of Roger's decline and fall from that high estate to his present ignoble one.

"An officer!" Mrs. Ottoway echoed the word with gusto. "But 'ow ever — "

"I'll tell you all about it if you really want to hear," John interrupted, skillfully transposing their respective attitudes and putting her in the position of being the one eager to

learn the story instead of he being the one anxious to impart it.

Evidently Mr. Ottoway might rampage, and he would, but he would have to wait for his tea until such time as his wife might choose to give it to him, for she set the saucepan on the side of the range, untied and removed her apron, then, drawing up a chair opposite to John's, sat herself down and prepared to listen.

So once again, with certain notable omissions (Mrs. Ottoway would never have stomached last night's episode even where it concerned a tramp who had once been an officer), Roger's history was related, broken by sundry ejaculations from the listener, and, when John ended, she sat staring at him almost as though she were in an hypnotic trance and waited till he should awaken her out of it. When, at last, after a deep sigh, she did speak, John sighed, too, with relief, for he knew the victory was as good as won.

" Poor lamb," said Mrs. Ottoway, wiping the tears from her eyes.

John was more touched than he cared to own by her ready acceptance of the story without reservation. Not for a single instant did she appear to have any doubts about Roger's good faith. Once safe in the inner fortress of Mrs. Ottoway's warm heart, she defended the one who had gained admittance there, as savagely as a lioness defends her cubs.

There only remained now to broach the subject of that empty room upstairs next to John's, and he approached it with due caution and a craftiness which the most finished diplomat might have envied.

" And now you see what a fix we are in, Mrs. Ottoway," he said guilelessly. " Of course I'm ready to guarantee the money for his lodgings, but where can I find any? I can't send him to a common lodging house " (" God forbid!" interposed Mrs. Ottoway fervently) "and nobody else would take him in as he is at present."

Mrs. Ottoway fell into the trap even more easily than he had dared hope.

"Wouldn't they? Then that's where you make a mistake, Mr. Ffoulkes. I would, for one," she declared with emphasis. "There's that little room next the one you're in. It's small but it's clean, and it only wants the bed making up to be ready, and the poor gentleman's welcome to it, I'm sure, after what 'e's been through, and nothing to pay neither, and 'e an officer, too. Well, well, well! I wouldn't 'ave believed it if I 'adn't 'eard it with my own ears. A land fit for 'eroes to live in, indeed! 'T any rate I'll show 'im there's a room fit for one to sleep in." She paused for necessary breath and John seized the opportunity to get in a word.

"Mrs. Ottoway," he said, "you're — you're — I can't *tell* you what you are."

"Then don't 'urt yourself trying, my dear," said Mrs. Ottoway. "And 'im used to 'is soldier servant and all," the good soul was off again in full cry before John could stop her. "Well Ottoway didn't do much in the war except say 'ow badly it was going for us whenever we 'ad a bit of a set back, and sit groaning in the cupboard under the stairs every time them nasty zephyrlines went off, so 'e can do 'is bit now and see after 'im same as 'e does after you. And that saucy fellow at that office who dared to abuse 'is pore dead father! I wish I 'ad 'im 'ere now. I'd knock the stuffing out of 'im, that I would, yes, and the sauce, too. I'll be bound the only twinge of conscience *'e* ever felt was when war broke out and 'is King and Country needed 'im (or thought they did, not knowing anything about 'im in 'is true colours). 'Orrid little reptile!"

There was no doubt that once Mrs. Ottoway took up cudgels of defence she wielded them to some purpose. There was no half-heartedness about the matter. She hit right and left without regard to whom she might lay out in the process and John recognised with gratitude that she was prepared to meet all comers on Roger's behalf and to pit herself against any who might dare to question his prescriptive right to preferential treatment.

So relieved was he at the ease with which he had forced Mrs. Ottoway's hand that he sprang up from his chair and going over to her he put his arm round her waist, as far as it would go (she had risen from her seat at the same moment) and gave her a great squeeze. "You *are* a brick," he said.

"You needn't try to 'eave me if I am," she remarked, rocking unsteadily under the sudden and unexpected onslaught. "Let go, Mr. Ffoulkes, you'll 'ave me over."

John let go because, not having been able to secure a firm grip, he couldn't hold on any longer.

"I must go and tell Mr. Dibden," he said excitedly.

"Well, don't make too much of a song about it, there's a dear," Mrs. Ottoway begged. "We don't want to 'ave the poor boy feeling be'olden to us more than we can 'elp. It's a tonic 'e needs, not a black draught."

"The song's made already," John said.

"Oh! And 'oo made it then?" enquired Mrs. Ottoway, humouringly.

"One William Shakespeare," John told her. "Listen. This is how it goes:

"'Who is Sylvia? What is she? That all our swains commend her?'

"Isn't it ripping to have a song like that written about one?"

"Well, it sounds rubbish to me," Mrs. Ottoway candidly confessed. "And any'ow, it ain't likely 'e'd 'eard of me when 'e wrote it," she concluded with becoming modesty.

"No. It's not very likely," agreed John gravely. "But perhaps, you know, you were called after the person it was written about."

"No, I wasn't," said Mrs. Ottoway decidedly. "I was called after the 'ouse my mother lived in when she was a gal. Sylvia Cottage, 'Ammersmith, was the name of it."

When John went back into the sitting room Roger was still standing where he had left him by the fireplace, idly

fingering the ornaments which adorned the mantelpiece. He turned round as John entered.

"It's all right," said the latter, cheerfully. "I've fixed you up. There's a little room next mine that you can have. It's not much bigger than a glorified cupboard, I'm afraid, but it's quite decent." His apology for the size of the room was made with due deliberation. He was anxious to avoid any appearance of assuming that Roger ought to be grateful for the smallest mercy vouchsafed to him and to let him see that he was regarded as just an ordinary guest and not a mere object of grudging charity, on a level with a lost dog or a starving kitten, whom it was an act of grace to shelter.

Roger stared, hearing what John said, but not taking in the full meaning of his words.

For so long now he had been the sport of Fate; for so many weary months he had been thankful if the meagre earnings of the day warranted the luxury of a bed in a crowded doss-house or, if they did not, to content himself with a place on one of the seats on the Embankment, and too often, when cold or hunger or the two combined prevented sleep, had he dragged his tired, aching limbs through the slumbering streets, deserted by all save policemen and lovelorn cats and an occasional outcast like himself, homeless and desolate, who shuffled past without a word or look, a flitting shadow in the city of shadows. He had learned to recognise these gray, silent ghosts as heralds of the majesty of the law, for many times, before their stumbling footsteps were even out of earshot, he had heard the heavy tramp of the constable on his beat following in their wake and, like them, he had accustomed himself to slink off in the opposite direction when he caught this sound approaching, sooner than submit to have the searching rays of a dark-lantern turned upon him in suspicious enquiry of his motives in being abroad when all good citizens should be abed and asleep. Therefore, when John announced in those positive tones that not only a bed, but a bed in a room which he

would have to himself, where he would not have to lie awake and listen to the snores and stifled groans and curses of other unfortunates, a room where he would have privacy and where it would be possible to shut himself in alone with his thoughts was waiting for him, it took him a little while to realise that his ears had not deceived him and that he was really being offered these inestimable boons. He had pictured in his imagination, being handed the price of a night's lodging and told to go away and come back in the morning, and the picture had been so insufferable that he had had much ado not to take advantage of John's absence to bolt, and it was only the recollection of those few seconds during which he had stood with John's hands resting on his shoulders and with John's eyes searching his and the sound of his voice as he said, "I'll risk it. Is it a deal?" that had kept him from stealing quietly out of the house and losing himself once more in the labyrinth of London. Yet even now, when he had only to stretch out and grasp the line thrown out to draw him to safety, the demon of false pride ever on the lookout to stultify the fulfillment of his dreams, held him back, whispering maliciously in his ear that now was the time to assert his independence if he didn't wish to lose it for good and all; that, if he allowed himself to be pulled out of the quagmire into which he had fallen, it would be to find himself bound to the chariot wheels of his rescuer to adorn his triumph and that it was better to die a free man than live in shackles.

"God!" he exclaimed, in accents of despair. "I've sunk pretty low, haven't I? Last night I cadged off Mrs. Rycroft and tonight I cadge off you, and tomorrow and the day after, I suppose, I shall cadge off any Tom, Dick and Harry I can find to listen to my whining. 'Kind gentleman, spare a poor man a copper to get a night's lodging.' Once having tasted the sweets of charity I shall become a glutton for them, I shall be stripped of my last rag of self-respect. You must let me off our deal. It wasn't part of our bargain that you should provide me with board and lodging. You

must let me off." He dropped heavily into a chair as he finished speaking, worn out by the violence of his emotions, and hid his face in his shaking hands.

It was easy to see that his physical, rather than his mental condition, was responsible for this wild outburst. From sheer bodily exhaustion he had worked himself up into such a state of morbid imagination that he had lost all sense of proportion and all self-control.

John had come across other similar cases before this where men, released from some great strain, but with their minds still numb from the effects of it, had found a difficulty in realising that they were no longer pinned down by Fate but were free to rise again and *be* men. It is on a par with that blind unreasoning terror which incites a dog whose leg is caught in the teeth of a trap, to snap at the hand which is setting it at liberty.

He understood the promptings of the mood, but he also recognised the necessity of checking it at the outset, before it had time to get a stranglehold on its creature.

Going across to Roger, whose breath was coming in quick pants that were almost sobs, he took hold of him by the shoulders and shook him roughly.

"Stop it," he said authoritatively, seeing that the younger man had arrived at the pitch when nothing but stern measures would bring him back to his senses. "You're making a bally fool of yourself." The very harshness of the terse sentence acted like a douche of cold water on Roger, as John had intended it should. Gradually the heavy breathing became normal, the spasms of trembling, which rippled over his body like an ague, died away, and his hands dropped from his face to his lap.

John pulled up a chair and sat down opposite to him, so close that their knees almost touched.

"Now, look here, old chap," he said impressively. "This won't do. You've got to pull yourself together. I know you've had a rotten time but you've still got grit enough to fight for things worth while. It's not a bit of use

to beat the air, which is what you're doing. No. You've got to listen to me. It's my turn now." As Roger would have protested. "You've got to put that cursed pride of yours in your pocket and keep it there till it's wanted. You appear to regard the most footling scrap of help given you as the pawn ticket of your self-respect. What would you think of the man who, when he had a chance to escape from a burning house by tying the blankets together, and making a rope of them to swarm down by, refused on the plea that the blankets weren't his own? You'd think him the worst kind of fool, wouldn't you? And yet that's exactly the line of conduct you're adopting! Why, man alive, you're not preserving your self-respect. You're simply chucking it away. You accepted me as your friend just now. You've not taken long to find out that my friendship's not worth having, have you? Perhaps it hasn't occurred to you that I have my pride, too, and that you lower it when you think so little of my offer that, at the first opportunity, you throw it on the dust-heap without compunction. You've the power to call our deal off if you wish it. I can't keep you here against your will but, for God's sake, don't decide in a hurry. Take time — all the time you want — to think it over. Go right back to the beginning and start from there, leaving out that — that *damnable* rot you talked about cadging, and then, *when* you've thought, if you still feel you want to go I won't say another word, but, if you make up your mind to stay, well, once again — what's the matter with me?" He gave Roger a friendly little pat on the side of the knee as he finished speaking and getting up strolled across to the window where he stood, looking out into the street, waiting. He felt he had been rather brutal to speak as he had done. It seemed so like hitting a man when he was down. All the same he didn't regret it. Mrs. Ottoway had said it was a tonic Roger needed, not a black draught, and he'd carried out her prescription faithfully. Whether the dose would have the hoped-for results remained to be seen.

Through the open window the ordinary everyday sounds of the outside world fell upon John's ears as he stood there; the shouts of the children at play; the voices of the group of women gossiping in a doorway opposite; the raucous laughter of a couple of girls who passed by enjoying some private joke of their own which found its vent in shrill, hysterical screams rivalling the screech of a peacock before rain; the distant bellow of a costermonger crying his wares; the clanging bells of the trams in the East India Dock Road beyond. All these customary noises reached him, but he was not conscious of them. He heard nothing but the deathly silence in the room behind.

Roger, for the first minute or two after John had done speaking, sat there staring with unseeing eyes at the carpet. The attack had been so sudden and unexpected that it had, morally, winded him for the time being. He felt like a prize fighter who has had a knockout blow and lies prone, trying to recover himself sufficiently to get on his feet again before he is counted out. Then his brain began to reassert itself, but he was not thinking of John or of John's words but, in the unaccountable way in which past sights and sounds, hitherto forgotten, rise unbidden to the mind, he was back in the little church at Harwood. It was Evensong and his father was reading the lesson. He saw again the white head aureoled against the light of the candles on the altar, and heard his voice, clear and ringing.

"Behold, I set before you this day a blessing and a curse."

Why that one verse, more than another, should have detached itself and become engraved on the tables of his memory, he couldn't explain but there it was and so vivid was the scene, so distinctly did he hear the words uttered in the familiar accents, that it seemed impossible to realise that he was only there in spirit and that his body was "years and a hundred leagues away" from the setting of the picture.

"Behold, I set before you this day a blessing and a curse."

Was it a message from the grave? Was it something more than a mere memory? Was it, indeed, a vision splendid? Could it really be that the living, by their actions, were able to disturb the peace of the dead?

"A blessing and a curse!" There they were set before him to choose between. The blessing of renewed hope, of friendship, of safety. The curse of despair, of loneliness, of abandonment. All he had to do to secure the blessing was to "put his cursed pride in his pocket and keep it there till it was wanted," as John had expressed it. Then if that were so, his pride *was* the curse. He had known it all the time, in his heart of hearts, only he had refused to acknowledge it. He had willfully blinded his eyes to the truth and it had taken a voice from heaven to reveal it.

"I'll stay," he said, brokenly.

John swung round from the window.

"Now you're talking," he said. "Come along up and let's get that pair of trousers."

CHAPTER IX

The Thursday of the following week was Ascension Day so John took the Wednesday as his holiday and employed it, without letting Roger into his confidence, in going down to Harwood.

He had gathered by desultory questioning, that there was no squire in the village and that the principal house was a farm owned by a man called Jolland who had, in the late vicar's time, been church-warden.

There had been a certain intimacy apparently between the Vicarage and The Hill Plat and it had been Jolland's son Dick who had given Roger his first lessons in shooting and riding, who had shown him how to throw a fly and who had taught him to swim by the simple expedient of picking him up and chucking him bodily into the water, jumping in himself after his protesting pupil in order to act as life-buoy.

Dick Jolland had been fifteen years older than Roger and had died of dysentery in Salonica in 1918.

It had been on the tip of John's tongue to ask why Roger had not sought their aid when things were going badly, but he remembered the circumstances connected with Mr. Dibden's death, and when Roger volunteered the statement that the Jollands were among his father's creditors he was glad he had refrained.

In the six days that Roger had been at Eddis Street there had been an astounding change not only in his appearance, but also in his personality. With the improvement in his physical condition due to a sufficiency of food, sound sleep at nights and cheerful companionship in the daytime he had taken on a saner outlook towards life in general. He no longer weighed the common courtesies in the balance and found them wanting against that insensate pride of his

in the opposite scale, but received them gracefully in the spirit in which they were offered. He learned to view the future, if not with optimism, at least with calmness. He even, at the end of two or three days, laughed spontaneously and not merely because he saw it was expected of him, and when a man gives rein to his sense of humour, after having taken a toss, it means that his nerves haven't suffered at any rate.

Mrs. Ottoway had gathered him under her expansive wing and clucked over him like an old hen after a chicken. She waylaid him with glasses of milk and cups of Bovril at all sorts of inconvenient hours, as though to make up for his short commons in the past, and chivvied the unfortunate Ottoway out of his warm, comfortable bed ten minutes before the usual time every morning in order that he might do his neglected "bit" and act the part of soldier servant. Mr. Ottoway had displayed the utmost surprise (perhaps, in this case, not altogether unfounded) on hearing of the new inmate of his house, and it was just as well that Roger was clad in John's gray flannel suit before they met for otherwise he would never have been brought to believe that his wife's latest "poor lamb" had ever held a commission, even a temporary one, in His Majesty's forces.

Harwood, John discovered, was three miles from the nearest station, Tallis, which was about an hour by train from Charing Cross. It was a perfect spring day and he set out to walk the intervening distance with the anticipatory enjoyment which only a countryman, who has been boxed up in town for months, can know.

Every leaf on every tree, every stolid cow chewing the cud in the lush meadows, every bird flying out of the hawthorn-laden hedges which bordered the lanes through which he passed, was a dear familiar object reminding him of his far-off home. It only wanted the roar of the sea to make his cup of contentment brim over. Up hill and down dale, through wooded copses and over open field paths he wended his way, whistling snatches of half-forgotten songs (slightly out of tune), and stopping now and again to bury his nose

in a spray of honeysuckle or watch the bumblebees lumbering in and out of the flowers growing on the banks.

It was noon before, looking down from a rise in the ground, he saw The Hill Plat on the other side of a dip which sloped steeply to a brook gurgling over its stoney bed between gray-green willows. He knew it was The Hill Plat because a yokel, of whom he asked his way, jerked an earthy thumb in the direction of the low white house and said something quite unintelligible from which he disentangled the one word "yonder."

So he clambered down the slope, jumped the stream, and, mounting the hill on the further side, presently found himself in a trellised porch which screened an open doorway leading straight into a square paved kitchen where rows of copper pots and pans twinkled merrily in the bright rays of the noonday sun which poured in through a large window at the side of the huge open fireplace, which filled half the end wall of the "house-place."

A pleasant looking, apple-cheeked woman, with plentiful black hair, showing signs of gray, was bustling about busy with the preparations for the midday meal, and she came to the door directly she heard John's step outside.

"Did you want to see the master?" she enquired, looking at the visitor with frank curiosity. She wondered where this stranger parson had sprung from and why he had appeared at this hour. She knew he did not belong to any of the neighbouring parishes for she was well acquainted with all the clergy for miles around.

John, for his part, wondered whether she were Mrs. Jolland. There was something so refreshingly homely about her, so unlike the modern up-to-date farmer's wife who hovers uncertainly on the border-line of "the County" and does her shopping by post in case she may be suspected of going in to market, that he hardly dared hope he had struck one who was not above doing her own cooking and who breathed a pleasantly rural atmosphere which seemed redolent of all the nice clean scents of a farm, the new-mown

hay, the warm cows stalled in the byre, the apple store with its shelves of red and yellow and green fruit, the fresh-turned sods of earth after a shower.

"Are you Mrs. Jolland?" he enquired.

"Yes, Sir," she replied. "Will you please to walk in and take a seat?"

John could have cried aloud with pleasure at the simplicity of the invitation, given with straightforward directness and without a trace of false shame. There was no apology for her occupation or her dress. Both were so natural to her that it never crossed her mind that they might possibly appear to be beneath her dignity in the minds of other people. For forty years, ever since her marriage, she had cooked the dinner for "the master" and his men, and it was as much a part of the daily routine as cleaning her teeth or saying her prayers when she got up in the morning or went to bed at night.

"I'm interrupting you, I'm afraid," John said hesitatingly.

"Well, Sir, I am a bit busy, to tell you the truth," she admitted. "We have our dinner at half-past twelve. I suppose," she paused uncertainly, then went on, "I suppose you wouldn't care to sit down and have a bit with us? That's to say if you're not bound for anywhere else."

"I say! That's most awfully kind of you," John said. "If you're quite sure I shan't be putting you out?"

"Why, Sir, one extra doesn't make a mite o' difference," she said heartily. "The master'll enjoy your company. He likes meeting strangers, and we don't get many round these parts. We're off the beaten track."

Her hospitable invitation had quite a Colonial smack about it. It is not often in England that an utter stranger is welcomed to the family board, and to John, who had looked forward to nothing better than a lunch of bread and cheese in a musty inn parlour, it sounded almost feudal.

"There's a seat in the garden, Sir," Mrs. Jolland said. "You'd like to sit there, I daresay."

Had she been a duchess she could not have dismissed him from the sphere of her activities with greater tact of delicacy, and John appreciating the fact that he would be in her way in the kitchen took the hint and departed gardenwards to enjoy a pipe and his own thoughts for half an hour.

He felt considerably relieved after seeing Mrs. Jolland for she gave him confidence. She did not strike him as being the kind of woman who would allow private prejudice to blind her judgments and he was not afraid of the unrepaid loan to Mr. Dibden influencing her just estimate of his son. He was positive that he could get from her the confirmation of the opinion he himself had formed of Roger and, with that to back him, he was ready to put his thumb into the pie and extract therefrom the biggest plum he could find for him.

At half-past twelve he returned to the house. The long table in the kitchen was laid and the place seemed, at first sight, to be crowded out with men. As a matter of fact there were only half a dozen, including Mr. Jolland, a short thickset individual with bushy white whiskers and a bald head.

He came forward as John entered and held out a podgy hand.

"Pleased to meet you, Sir," he said. "Having a look round our parts?"

"No. As a matter of fact, I've run down from town to get a little information out of you."

"And what may it be about, Sir?" enquired Mr. Jolland, a note of suspicion creeping into his voice.

There is nothing your countryman dislikes so much as being cross-examined.

"Oh, it's not about anything very serious," John reassured him. "If you can spare me a minute after lunch, and Mrs. Jolland too, I'd be awfully obliged."

"Dinner's ready, Father," interrupted Mrs. Jolland. "Let the gentleman sit next you."

They all moved to their places at the table, Mr. Jolland at the head of it with John on his right, backing on to the door, an empty chair opposite to him to be eventually occupied by Mrs. Jolland, who was superintending the carving of a huge round of beef at a side table. Next to John was a girl of about twenty-five or six, whom Mr. Jolland briefly introduced as "my youngest, Winnie," and beyond the empty chair sat a second edition of Mr. Jolland (minus the whiskers and bald head) whom John gathered was "my boy, George."

The lower end of the table was filled by the farm men who lived in, a heterogeneous collection of grinning yokels who shuffled uneasily in their seats and nudged one another in the ribs whenever they met John's eye.

"Will you ask a blessing, Sir?" asked Mr. Jolland, and the entire company, who had only just seated themselves, rose again to their feet with a good deal of scraping of chair legs on the stone floor, while John said grace.

On the wall behind the farmer, John noticed an enlarged photograph of a soldier in khaki with the name "Richard Carruthers Jolland" on an oblong brass plate let into the frame, and, below it, in another frame, one of those cards which were distributed during the war with the words "A man has gone from this house," printed in black letters on a white ground.

So that there was Roger's mentor and friend, Dick, of whom he had spoken.

John looked with interest at it and Mrs. Jolland, on her way to take her seat, noticed him.

"Our eldest, Sir," she said simply. "He died in Salonica."

"But we've still three left," said her husband bravely. "*And* Winnie here. We're luckier than some."

He spoke almost as though he had had a rough and tumble with Fate and got the best of it at the cost of a few scratches.

"There's Berry in Canada, and Walter, he's in Aus-

tralia," his wife took up the tale. "And George here," she patted her son's arm with maternal pride, but John caught a glimpse of the hungry longing in her eyes and guessed at the blank in her heart which the living, dear to her as they were, could never quite fill.

They talked on indifferent subjects after that until the meal was finished and the labourers and George clattered noisily out of the kitchen while Winnie, assisted by a couple of stout girls got trays and proceeded to clear the table.

"Shall we go outside, Sir?" suggested Mr. Jolland, and he led the way, followed by his guest and Mrs. Jolland, to the garden seat on the little plot of grass at the side of the house where John had sat before dinner.

"I didn't rightly catch your name, Sir," he said politely, when they had settled themselves. Not for the world would he have made John uncomfortable by reminding him that the reason he did not know it was because it had never yet been mentioned.

"My name is Ffoulkes," John told him.

"Ah, Ffoulkes," repeated Mr. Jolland, as though the information told him all he wanted to know.

"You haven't come to bring us bad news about — about either of our boys, Sir?" asked Mrs. Jolland tremulously.

John remembered the pathetic card hanging underneath Dick Jolland's picture in the kitchen. "A man has gone from this house," it said. A man had gone from it, never to return, and the tender mother-heart, bruised and bleeding, had found it impossible to accustom itself to the idea that distance and danger were not necessarily synonymous terms.

John reassured her hastily.

"No, no," he said. "I promise you it's nothing of that sort."

"The Missus gets worrying, Sir," said Mr. Jolland. "You see we had our four boys fighting and then we lost our eldest, besides having two wounded, and what with

Berry and Wally being so far off and all, she's forever on the fidget like."

"I can quite understand that," John said. "But I never even heard of your three youngest sons, or knew of their existence, until today."

"Then it was Dick you knew," said Mrs. Jolland quickly.

"No, Mrs. Jolland. I didn't even know *him*, but he used to be very kind to — to a man I met a few days ago, and as I was anxious to find out something about this man, I thought you wouldn't mind my coming to you for the necessary information."

"Who is this friend of Dick's, Sir?" Mrs. Jolland asked quietly.

"His name is Roger Dibden," John answered.

"Master Roger!" exclaimed Mrs. Jolland, shaken out of her habitual calm. "Why of course we know him well. It was Dick learned him all he knew about sport. He set great store by him, Dick did. 'I'm going to learn him to be a man, for he won't learn it from his Dad, who doesn't know a horse from a cow, or a gun from a fishing rod," Dick used to say, and it was true, too. The old gentleman was so wrapped up in his books that he'd even walk along the roads with his nose buried in one. So Dick took him in hand and turned him into a real country lad. Not but what Mr. Dibden fair worshipped the boy, I will say that, and when the trouble came — " she stopped rather suddenly and looked enquiringly at her husband.

"Never you mind about the trouble, Mother," he said. "That's past and done with. We don't want to rake it up."

"I know all about the trouble, Mr. Jolland," John remarked. "Mr. Dibden made rather a mess of his money affairs, didn't he?"

"Mess!" exclaimed the farmer. "He were in it up to the neck, and Master Roger left to pay the piper for the tune the old gentleman had called. Why, he owed me a matter of something like a hundred and fifty pun."

"But the master didn't press for it, Mr. Ffoulkes," put in Mrs. Jolland hurriedly. "He'd been friendly like with Mr. Dibden and besides, our Dick was fond of the boy. Why! In the very last letter we had from him before — before he died, he spoke of Master Roger and the way he was left, and asked his Dad to let him off the money. We haven't seen Master Roger since. He never came back to the place, not even for the funeral. Mr. Gundry, the lawyer over at Capel, settled up everything, as far as it could be settled, and the lad just disappeared. Folks said he couldn't bear to face people about here, though I'm sure we'd have been glad enough to see him, for he wasn't to blame. An honester lad than Master Roger never stepped the earth. Dick always said so and Dick knew him better than any other, his father included."

"Never once caught him out in a lie, Dick said," added Mr. Jolland.

"So you've seen Master Roger lately, Sir," said Mrs. Jolland. "To think of that now. And what's been happening to him all this long time?"

"I'm afraid he's been a bit on his beam ends, Mrs. Jolland," John told her. "But that's all over now, I hope. He's got friends helping him and they'll put him on his feet again. It was really on that account that I came here today, because I wanted to get a testimonial from someone who had known him in the old days."

"D'you mean a bit of writing, Sir?" asked Mr. Jolland.

"No, not necessarily writing," John answered. "Just inside information for my own satisfaction. Not that I had any doubts myself, but you see I've known him such a short time that I'm not in a position to give any guarantees."

"Well, Sir, you can trust him, take my word for it," said Mr. Jolland.

"And mine," his wife supplemented. "I've watched him grow from a baby; he was in and out of here like as if it was his second home, following Dick about and trotting

at his heels like a little dog. He'd mind Dick when he'd mind nobody else, and Dick didn't spoil him either. I've not forgotten one or two thrashings he gave him; once for telling a story, and another time for stealing some sweeties off the dresser in my kitchen. I remember I tried to beg him off, but Dick said 'No.' He said he'd got to be shaped while he was limber, else he'd shape himself and maybe do it wrong. Our Dick shaped him right, never fear."

"I thought I wasn't mistaken about him," John said gratefully. "Now I can carry on."

"But he's proud, Sir. He wouldn't have taken a licking from most," the farmer said, chuckling. "Do you remember that time, Mother, when his kite flew off over Asher wood and got lost, and a gentleman passing offered him half-a-crown to buy another with? Gosh! I thought he'd hit him he was that upset."

"Aye that I do," said Mrs. Jolland. "Nearly crying, he was, when he came and told me about it. 'I'm not a beggar boy,' he said, clenching his tiny fist."

"He's a bit like that now," remarked John grimly, as he got up to go.

"Well, give Master Roger my respects," Mr. Jolland said, as John shook hands with him.

"And my love," said kindly Mrs. Jolland, then in a lower tone so that it should not reach her husband's ear, "and Dick's, Mr. Ffoulkes," she added.

It was a relief to John to have had this testimonial of Roger's worth from the Jollands, not because he himself had any doubts of it, he had been sure of him from the first; but because it strengthened his hands in the none too easy task of finding him a job. Would-be employers could hardly be expected to accept his assurance as to Roger's honesty on the very slender grounds of a week's acquaintanceship with him and no other credentials.

John could well understand how it was that Roger had fought shy of these friends even when he was desperate.

Even if he could have made up his mind to return to the place where his father had lived in honour and died in dishonour, if he could have borne to risk the possible sneers of those who had once upon a time shown him deference as the son of one they looked up to and reverenced, there still remained the fact that there was a large sum of money owing to the Jollands which there was little prospect of their ever getting. Roger, it is true, could not, except in a moral sense, be held liable, but it had been for his sake that the debt had been incurred and although the Jollands had put in no claim and had held themselves aloof when the other creditors swooped down to save what they could out of the wreckage, it must have made it well-nigh impossible to get back on to exactly the same footing as formerly.

He got back to Eddis Street in time for tea and had already started the meal when Roger, who had been out on his daily round of interviewing the insertors of enticing advertisements in the daily papers, came in.

"Any luck?" John asked.

Roger shook his head.

"References," he replied tersely. "You can't blame 'em. I'd be the same myself if I was an employer of labour. How do they know I won't rob the till first opportunity? I seem to be up a damned — sorry, Padre — a *cul de sac*."

"But even a *cul de sac* has a way out if one chooses to look for it," declared John. "You may have to scale a wall, or batter on somebody's front door and demand a passage through their house, or climb up a railway embankment and cross the line, but it can be done."

"Or swim a canal, or tear one's clothes on a barbed wire entanglement, or spike oneself on iron railings, or circumvent a savage watch-dog guarding his master's premises. Oh yes, it can be done," supplemented Roger, dryly. "And we've left out the most obvious way out, which is the way in."

"*Verboten*," John warned him. "If you're always going back to where you started from you'll never get anywhere."

"I rather fancy there's a flaw in your argument. According to you the man who took the wrong turning would wander further and further out of the right way until he was hopelessly lost beyond any hope of recovery."

"I'm assuming that the man's objective lies in the direction he's making for,—that on the other side of the obstacle at the tip of the *cul de sac* is the journey's end."

"Nothing to do with lovers' meetings, I trust?" enquired Roger, banteringly.

"Well, after all, you couldn't get a much stronger objective, so why not, while we're talking in parables, imagine that our man is on his way to keep tryst with the lady of his choice? If love's strong enough to make the world go round, it's strong enough to find a way through anything and everything that tries to bar its progress," John replied.

"All the same, I think it's generally quicker to go round," observed Roger.

"It depends how far round you have to go," John said. "Have some more tea?"

"This discussion is now closed, Editor," remarked Roger with mock pomposity.

John laughed. It was a source of gratification to him to notice how, with good feeding, companionship and the tonic treatment which Mrs. Ottoway had advocated, Roger had regained a saner outlook on life and could even see that there was a humorous side to it.

John waited until they had finished tea before telling Roger of his visit to Harwood.

"I met a friend of yours today," he said.

Roger, who was lighting his pipe by the fireplace, with his back to John, threw the match he had been using into the empty grate and turned to face the room.

"A friend of mine!" he exclaimed wonderingly. "Was it Mrs. Rycroft?"

John shook his head.

"No it wasn't Mrs. Rycroft," he replied.

"I haven't got any other friends except you," Roger said with a puzzled frown.

"It was Mrs. Jolland."

"Mrs. Jolland!"

"Dick's mother. She sent you her love — and Dick's."

"Sent me Dick's love! But Dick's dead," said Roger, mystified.

"I know Dick's dead, but his love isn't. D'you really suppose love is such a poor weak thing that it cannot outlast the accident of Death? It belongs to the soul, not the body, it's real, and not just mere passion which is only a transient emotion masquerading as Love.

"Anyhow, I've given you her message."

"But how did you come to meet Mrs. Jolland?" asked Roger.

"I've been down to Harwood," John answered.

"Oh, so you've been down to Harwood. To find out if I had spoken the truth I suppose," Roger said caustically.

"Not a bit of it. To be able to convince other people that I am speaking the truth when I tell them that you're white," John said quietly. "The world's a funny old place and doesn't like accepting anything at its face value. It wants to know the rate of exchange before it does a deal."

"I'm a suspicious brute," Roger said contritely. "I beg your pardon. I didn't mean to — to say what I did. I've been an Esau for so long that I've rather got out of the way of trusting people, though goodness knows that I ought to trust you if I trust anybody for I've put you to a pretty stiff test of endurance. The clothes I wear, the food I eat, the very tobacco I'm smoking, in a pipe belonging to you, are all borrowed and I can't even give you any security for them. Borrowing seems to be in the blood," he concluded bitterly.

"Don't start worrying about that," John said. "I'm

keeping a strict account. Up to date you owe me thirty shillings for board, a quarter of a pound of Navy Cut, seven and sixpence for incidental expenses and a pair of boots, and, if it will ease your tender conscience, I'll add an item of five bob for hire of clothes."

"I've worn a hole in your socks already!" said Roger ruefully.

"Then that will be another penny for darning material," John informed him gravely.

He had learned that it was better not to argue with Roger when he was in one of his abject moods but to employ the *reductio ad absurdum* tactics and, while ostensibly agreeing with him, gently lead him to see the somewhat ridiculous attitude he had adopted, which invariably had the effect of bringing him to his senses.

He was also particularly careful never to show any signs of what he called the "S. O. S. stunt," that is to say he never, by either word or action, sought to exercise his prerogatives as a priest and poke an inquisitive finger into Roger's soul. Spiritual patronage forcibly administered is apt to defeat its own ends and, besides, John was too humble-minded and too large-hearted to assume lightly that any other man was more lacking in inward grace than himself.

His methods on this occasion had the desired effect. Roger, instead of working himself up into a state of morbid introspection, laughed.

"Tell me about Harwood," he said. "While I smoke my borrowed tobacco in a pipe that has been lent me."

So John told him all about his visit to The Hill Plat, and what Mr. and Mrs. Jolland had said, and how pleased they had been to hear of Roger again, and how Mrs. Jolland had spoken of Dick and his affection for him, and he finished by repeating once more her parting message.

"I owe Dick Jolland a lot," Roger said softly, when John had concluded his recital of the day's doings. "It wasn't everyone I'd have stood a thrashing from (and he

could lay in too, and no mistake), but somehow I felt it was almost a compliment from him. You see, it was a case of hero-worship. Dick stood in my eyes for everything that was manly and right, and if he thought I needed a thrashing it never entered my head to question it. I just accepted it as I accepted any other decision of his. I honestly believe it was the thought of Dick and that thrashing he gave me for stealing those sweets that saved me the other night when — when I picked up that pendant thing. I was on the point of giving way when something he said that day, after he'd gruelled me, suddenly came into my head."

"What was that?" asked John.

"He said 'If you were to grow up dishonest, Master Roger, I think I'd be too ashamed to live,'" Roger said. "I don't know why he constituted himself my moral guardian in that way. I suppose it was because he was fond of me, and of course my dear old Dad had no idea of training me by hand. He saw I said my prayers and learned my catechism and went to church on Sundays, and occasionally he'd talk about religion and that sort of thing to me, but it was always miles above my head and he never realised that I didn't understand half he said. It was Dick who taught me to play the game and made me see that texts and catechism and church-going aren't much good without truth and honour and clean-living to back them up. I daresay his creed seems a bit topsy-turvy to you but he always maintained that you had to learn the rules of life first and graft your religion on to them. Most people, I imagine, would put it the other way round and make religion the basis for the rest. Anyway, whether he was right or wrong, he worked upon those lines himself and proved them successful for he was one of the straightest men I've ever known. Dear old Dick."

"One judges by results, not the method of arriving at them," John said. "After all, truth and honour and clean-living are essential parts of the Christian religion, so it

strikes me it doesn't much matter if they are learned first, as long as it doesn't end there and the other things follow. Your Dick must have been a big man."

"One of the biggest," said Roger enthusiastically.

"How did you hear of his death?"

"I happened to pick up an old copy of a paper in our rest billets that some previous occupier had left there and it was in the casualty list. At that time death seemed to be so much a part of one's daily life that I think I hardly minded. It was only afterwards, when I knew death had passed me over, that I missed him. The world was so horribly lonely without him somewhere in it."

There was silence for a few minutes, then Roger went over to John.

"You've made it so that Dick isn't ashamed — to live," he said. "Just remind me of that, will you, when I forget it myself?"

Then before John could say anything in reply, he was out of the room and a second later, the front door banged.

CHAPTER X

THE next morning brought a letter to John from his mother. It was a characteristic epistle consisting mostly of village gossip with a few loyal sentiments thrown in and a hope expressed that John was not tempted by the unusual warmth of the weather into lightly discarding his winter underclothing before May was out.

But the chief interest for its recipient lay in the terse postscript.

"P. S. Mr. Peal is wanting a secretary if you should hear of anyone."

John read the brief statement over two or three times then glanced at Roger who was too engrossed in dissecting a bloater to notice the attention bestowed upon him.

"Can you type?" he asked abruptly.

Roger paused in his absorbing occupation and looked up.

"Me?" he asked.

"You can't talk grammar anyhow," observed John.

"I can if I give my mind to it," Roger said.

"D'you mean you can talk grammar or type?" enquired John.

"Both," Roger answered. "I was rather a dab hand with the typewriter when I was at school. It was the blood thing to do for a couple of terms.

"What d'you want to know for?"

"Cast your optics over that," John said, tossing the letter to Roger.

"Am I to read it?" the latter enquired.

"The postcript," John said. "The rest wouldn't interest you. It's mostly on the iniquity of my mother's washerwoman having dared to produce twins. My mother calls it improvident of her though I should have described it as the very opposite myself."

Roger carefully picked the letter out of the marmalade dish where it had fallen and read the bit indicated.

"I say!" he exclaimed when he had done so. "Do you mean you think he'd take me on?"

"Well, I don't see any reason against having a jolly good try for it anyway," John said. "I've known old Peal all my life and he's rather keen on me so I think he'd listen to what I say."

"What will you say?" Roger enquired eagerly. "It's a bit di — difficult, isn't it?"

"You know you're the greatest adept at making mountains out of mole-hills that I ever met," declared John. "What's there difficult about it?"

"Oh, I don't know," Roger said doubtfully. "Only —"

"Only what?" John demanded.

"Oh, I don't know," Roger repeated in a helpless manner.

"You evidently *don't,* from the maddening persistence with which you keep on telling me so," John said. "If you really are anxious to find out what I shall say I'll be happy to show you the letter when I write to the old boy in which I propose to make him fully acquainted with the facts of the case."

"Won't that put him off?" asked Roger quickly.

"No. If anything it'll put him on," replied John. "As I said just now, I've known old Peal all my life and he's one of the kindest men going. Probably his only regret will be that you aren't a reformed drunkard and an ex-convict."

"What's he like?"

"He's nearing seventy, I should think, and he lives at my home, quite close to my people, at a biggish house called The Rise, with an old butler called Harcourt and an ancient housekeeper called Seal and an aged housemaid called Olivia, who keep a staff of underlings to do their work for them. I believe that years ago he had a wife who originally engaged Harcourt and Seal and Olivia and I fancy he regards them in the light of a legacy. Mrs. Peal only lived a year after their marriage so it practically was a

mere interlude in his bachelordom. He writes books on crustaceans which he publishes at his own expense because there's no market for them and he's gentleness itself unless the ornaments on the drawing room mantelpiece are not in their right places, when he becomes temporarily insane. I expect he's starting another book. I suppose you don't, by any lucky chance, know anything about crustaceans, do you?"

"Does that mean shrimps and things?" enquired Roger.

"Something of that sort, I fancy," John answered.

"Then I'm afraid I don't," Roger said humbly.

"Oh, well, I don't suppose that matters," said John hopefully. "He probably only wants somebody to copy out his manuscripts."

"I daresay I could swot it up," Roger suggested.

"I'll write to him anyhow directly we've finished breakfast. By the way, have you a second name, because if so he'll want to know it. He's dead nuts on names in full. I suppose it's the result of crustacean research. I have an idea that shell-fish are corkers for names in full when they're entered up in the stud book."

"Well I have, but it's one I rather try to forget," Roger said. "It's a bit — er — well, you know."

"I don't in the least," John declared. "Write it down if you're shy of saying it out loud."

"It's Daniel," Roger said, bringing it out with a rush.

"Great Scott! Nothing worse than that? I thought it was something awful like Vavasour or Brabazon or something of that sort. I'd sooner have it than my second name."

"What's yours?"

"Treadaway," John said. "Did you ever hear anything so comic in your life? Just because my father had a friend with a ridiculous surname he must needs saddle me with it. I'm far more ashamed of it than you could possibly be of a respectable name like Daniel. Look sharp and finish your breakfast and we'll concoct this epistle."

"I think I'll leave it to you, Padre," Roger said. "You know the sort of thing to say better than I do. Besides, I might check your flow of eloquence. You may want to write things that you'd rather I didn't see."

"So I may," John said. "Stand by with the dictionary then, in case I run to seed with my spelling. Spelling was never my strong point."

So Roger stood by with the dictionary while John wrote and at the end of half an hour he put down the pen with a sigh of relief.

"There, that's done," he exclaimed. "I'll post it on my way to church."

It was not till the following Monday that John got an answer. He was down before Roger and when he saw the envelope lying on the table he had to force himself to take it up and open it to find out whether the news it contained was good or bad. He dreaded the thought of having to tell Roger that the application had failed for he knew how high he had raised his hopes.

With a heart beating with excitement he drew the letter out of its cover and sat down to read it.

"My dear John," wrote Mr. Peal in his queer crabbed hand. "It was most kind and thoughtful of you to write and tell me of your young friend. He sounds to be just the kind of person I am requiring and from what you say I gather that, quite apart from my own needs, his is a case deserving recognition and encouragment, for he appears to have had a rough time of it. I am more than content to accept your estimate of the young man's character, supported as it is by the testimony of the friends you mention who knew him in earlier days. I am engaged on a work of some importance relating to the different species of mollusca found around our coasts and although I am unable to offer Mr. Roger Daniel Dibden a permanent post, I require his services for at least five months, perhaps longer. The remuneration I propose to give is at the rate of twelve pounds a month with board and lodging in my house, and if

Mr. Roger Daniel Dibden considers this adequate I shall be pleased to engage him as from this day week (Saturday, June 3d). On hearing from you that Mr. Roger Daniel Dibden accepts this post I shall be most happy to forward him two months' salary as no doubt he has several little things he wishes to purchase before he leaves town. Always, your sincere friend, Charles George Peal."

John didn't wait a second after he had finished this stilted letter with its satisfactory news but rushed out of the room, narrowly escaping knocking over Mrs. Ottoway and a trayful of china en route, and tearing upstairs two steps at a time dashed into Roger's bedroom without stopping to knock at the door.

"Oh, Roger Daniel Dibden," he shouted, waving the letter over his head, "the mollusca round our coasts are calling aloud for you to come and assist in raising them from the oblivion in which, hitherto, they have been sunk."

"What on earth are you talking about?" enquired Roger. Then, grasping the situation, "Is it — it isn't," he gasped incoherently, letting the stud with which he was in the act of fastening his collar drop from his fingers and roll unheeded under the chest of drawers.

"Isn't it? It is!" cried John. "Read."

He held out the letter to Roger who seized it eagerly and sitting down on the nearest available seat, which happened to be the bed, ran his eye over it.

"By Jove!" he said, when he had taken in the fact that he was actually engaged as Mr. Peal's secretary. "I can hardly believe it's true."

"It's only a temporary job, that's the fly in the ointment," John ventured to point out, afraid lest Roger had failed to take in that drawback to the post and yet unwilling to damp his spirits.

"What's a fly more or less when the ointment's yours? This job gives me five months' respite and when you've not dared to look twenty-four hours ahead, for fear of what lies beyond, five months is a life-time. Besides, I shall

start fresh with some money in my pocket *and* a reference, which I feel at present is a far more blessed word than Mesopotamia." Roger got up from the bed and stretched his arms out wide as though he were casting off a heavy burden from his shoulders.

"I say," he said shyly, "I'm a rotten hand at speechifying but I am no end grateful to you. If it hadn't been for you and — and Mrs. Rycroft, I'd have gone right under. I was just hanging on by my eyelids. I couldn't have held on much longer. I don't know that I *wanted* to hold on. I was so — so damned tired of it all. Life had strafed me till I was sore and there didn't seem any use in anything. I'd have been glad to get out of the grind of living, but now — I've got my second wind and I mean to have a jolly good shot at it. And it's all thanks to you two. By Jove! That thrashing of Dick's had bigger results than even he could ever have anticipated, hadn't it?"

"So many small causes go towards the making of a big result," John said. "If you'd been a minute later or earlier you wouldn't have seen that pendant drop."

"I say! What a perfectly ghastly thought," exclaimed Roger. "It makes me go cold all over."

"Well, I don't know about you, but I want my breakfast," John said. "I'm going down to it."

"I'll be with you in a jiffy," Roger said. "Don't wait for me."

"We must let Mrs. Rycroft know," John observed later on, when they were at their meal.

"What's Mr. Rycroft like?" enquired Roger curiously.

"Colonel Rycroft's dead, and I can't tell you what he was like because I never saw him," answered John briefly.

"Then Mrs. Rycroft's a widow," Roger exclaimed.

"I love to see the velocity with which your brain works," John said. "As you have been quick to observe, Mrs. Rycroft is a widow."

"I suppose Colonel Rycroft was killed in the war," Roger remarked meditatively.

"Colonel Rycroft died peacefully in his bed, having passed the age of being even a dug-out," John informed him.

"D'you mean he was *old?*" Roger asked amazedly.

"Somewhere in the sixties," John said.

"Well I'm blest!" ejaculated Roger.

"One generally is at the marriage of one's friends," observed John dryly. "I've frequently noticed that every couple that decides to get married is considered a misfit by disinterested parties."

"Or too interested parties," Roger shrewdly amended.

"Look here, young feller, are you trying to be personal?" enquired John threateningly. "Because if you are," he added, "you've come to the wrong shop."

For the space of a second or two Roger had a dreadful idea that he had really offended John and got fiery red, but he soon saw the twinkle in his eye and recovered himself.

"I say! I thought, for one awful minute, that I'd put my foot in it," he gasped. "I do wish you wouldn't be funny at my expense before I've finished my breakfast. I'm like Mr. Ottoway who tells me he suffers from a tetchy inside."

"What on earth's that?" asked John. "It sounds perfectly loathsome."

"It is, if Mr. Ottoway's unbowdlerized description of it is to be relied upon. He regales me with his symptoms when he calls me in the morning. They mostly hit below the belt, and, according to their victim, are directly attributable to the Kaiser for having permitted air-raids over London. It appears that the bombs dropped from Zeppelins had a peculiar effect on Mr. Ottoway's internal economy and caused it to turn tetchy. Doesn't he ever tell you about it when he brings your shaving water?"

"Never, I'm thankful to say," said John emphatically. "To go to another subject, hadn't you better start seeing about your kit today? You've only got five full days to do it in."

"And no money," Roger said. "I'll have to wait till my

boss sends me that twenty-four quid before I can get along."

"Rot," retorted John. "I'll fix you up for the time. At least we'll mouch round to the bank when I've written to the old bird, and while I'm doing that, you might send a line to Mrs. Rycroft. I don't quite know what my balance is, but you're welcome to the loan of what there is. Oh, and let's make out a list of what you'll want. I haven't heard Amelia sniffing about the house yet so I suppose she hasn't come, but we can pile the breakfast things at one end of the table and turn back the cloth."

So between them they moved the things, recklessly putting them in heaps which wobbled ominously whenever they touched the table, and, fetching writing materials from John's desk, sat down at the opposite end to the piled up crockery and set to work.

"You'll have to get reach-me-downs, I'm afraid," John said. "Go to one of those misfit places in the Brompton Road — "

"Where the marriages that aren't made in heaven are made," interrupted Roger.

"Don't play the goat. This is a serious matter," John admonished him severely. "We'll just put down the articles and settle how many of each you must have, afterwards. Now, I'll sing them out and you jot them down. Ready? Pyjamas, vests, pants."

"Hold hard a sec. How the dev — izes do you spell pyjamas?" asked Roger.

"Put it down as it comes into your head," said John. "As long as you recognise it that's all that matters. Got it? Vests, pants, socks, boots, shoes, shirts, collars, ties, and etceteras."

"What are they?" Roger enquired. "It seems an awful lot without any extras."

"My good ass, you must have a sponge and hairbrushes and so on," said John.

"I've got a hairbrush and a toothbrush and a razor,"

Roger said meekly, "I used to carry them about in my pocket."

"Are they respectable ones?" demanded John.

"Well, perhaps not very," Roger admitted. "They're a bit battered."

"Sponge, hairbrushes, toothbrush, razor and any other little things you think of," John said inexorably. "You've got to consider Harcourt's susceptibilities."

"I've thought of one other little thing already," Roger remarked.

"What?" asked John.

"A suit case to carry my expensive wardrobe about in," Roger said humbly. "I can't get *all* the things on that list into my pocket, can I? I say, it looks a frightful lot. Shall I get 'em all for the money?"

"Yes, if you go to the right shops," John said. "If you take my advice, you'll include a couple of pairs of shorts and some tennis shirts. That, and a pair of sand-shoes is all you'll want in the daytime down there. You'll probably spend a large part of your time in wading out to submerged rocks to study the limpet at home or track some rare mollusc to its watery lair. You can use my bathing suit till I come home for the holidays."

A loud sniff outside the door heralded the arrival of Amelia to clear away the breakfast things.

"Dash!" John exclaimed impatiently, "I simply can't set my mind to anything with that girl snuffling about the house."

"I rather like it," Roger said. "It reminds me of a bull-dog I once had. His name was Hector. If you find Amelia getting on your nerves, try calling her Hector for a bit and whistling for her when you want her."

"I never *do* want her," John said with decision, as the door opened to admit the subject of their remarks who appeared with a large metal tray hanging dejectedly in front of her knees so that with each step she took, it emitted a hollow sound. That and the frequent sniffs which

accompanied it suggested the war-dance of some savage tribe heard from a distance. In the hand which was not occupied with holding the tray she carried a handkerchief, badly in need of a wash, with which she dabbed her nose at intervals.

"Bissus Oddoway wishes to know if both gentleben will be in to dinner," she announced in a thick voice, with tray obligato.

Having, it would appear, learned the message by heart, and considering her mission accomplished when she had delivered it she did not wait for any instruction on the subject but proceeded to clatter the china on to the tray, balancing the latter in a most precarious position on a knee uplifted so that it rested against the edge of the table.

"You'll upset the whole caboodle in a minute," Roger observed, gazing at the manoeuvre apprehensively.

"Thank you, Sir," said Amelia gratefully, not attempting to change her course of action.

"I shall be in to lunch, Mr. Dibden will be out," John said, speaking slowly and distinctly.

"Thank you, Sir," repeated Amelia, once again applying the handkerchief to her nose and squeezing it deprecatingly, at the same instant giving a prolonged sniff.

Roger observed the action with keen interest.

"You can't have it both ways, you know, Amelia," he said.

"No, Sir. Thank you, Sir," she responded mechanically, without a notion of what he was driving at, but too polite to say so.

When Amelia had finally departed kitchenwards with the last trayload, John heaved a sigh of relief.

"That's all right," he said thankfully. "Now, pyjamas. Four suits I should think ought to do you."

"Considering that for months I hadn't one, I think I should feel a bit over-dressed with four," Roger said. "Let's make it three."

"Perhaps that would do as a start," John conceded. "You can always get another in Hine."

"How far is Hine?" enquired Roger.

"Only about a mile by the cliffs and a couple by road. Hine's the station for Porth Ros. The name of the village is really Surridge. Porth Ros is only, strictly speaking, the name of the bay. Oh, how beastly envious I am of you going there."

"Are you awfully keen on the place?" asked Roger.

"Keen on it!" John exclaimed. "There isn't another place on earth. It's the one and only."

"Why don't you try for a living somewhere near?"

"That's what my mother and aunt are everlastingly drumming into me. But I couldn't. I'd feel like a deserter. I get positively *sick* with longing for the sight and sound of the sea. I'm like the chap in Masefield's poem 'The Wanderer's Song.' Do you know it? It begins like this,

'A wind's in the heart o' me, a fire in my heels,
I am tired of brick and stone and rumbling waggon-wheels;
I hunger for the sea's edge, the limits of the land,
Where the wild old Atlantic is shouting on the sand.'

That verse is quite enough for me. I feel like sitting down and crying at the end of it."

"Go on. Don't stop to cry. It's simply top-hole," Roger said, his eyes shining.

So John went on, and at the end of the last two lines,

"'And I'll be going, going from the roaring of the wheels,
For a wind's in the heart o' me, a fire in my heels',"

he said rather bitterly,

"Only I shan't be going. This is the corner of the vineyard I've been set in, against the dusty high-road, and I've got to forget the sunny slopes and do the best I can with it."

"I say! It must be awful to feel as bad as that about it," Roger said sympathetically.

"It's the giving in to it that's awful," John said despondently. "I get the most frightful twinges of conscience about it. Mrs. Ottoway puts it down to the Spring. Oh, for goodness sake let's get back to your lingerie and forget it. Now how many vests do you think you'll want?"

So for the next quarter of an hour the two devoted themselves to the knotty question of Roger's requirements and disputed quantities with due deliberation as befitted the gravity of the situation. Then they concocted a letter to Mr. Peal, accepting the post of secretary for Mr. Roger Daniel Dibden, which the latter copied out and signed, after which they "mouched round" to the bank where John discovered his credit stood at ten pounds, fourteen and fivepence, whereupon he drew a cheque for ten pounds and handing over the money to Roger for current expenses, despatched him, protesting, to the West End to replenish, or, more accurately speaking, to furnish his wardrobe as far as the cash in hand would permit. John, sitting down to his solitary lunch at one o'clock, felt quite a sense of loneliness without the companionship to which he had become accustomed, and he began to realise that during the ten days which Roger had spent under the same roof with him, a feeling of something deeper than mere pity for one on whom fortune had cast an evil eye had taken root. A very real liking for this boy (for Roger was little more) had sprung up in John's breast and he felt a personal sense of responsibility towards him and as if it were up to him to act as a kind of guardian.

He broke the news of Roger's intended departure to Mrs. Ottoway when that good lady set before him the rice pudding that succeeded the chop that had formed the *pièce de résistance* of his mid-day repast.

"Going, is 'e," she remarked regretfully. "Well, a nicer spoken young gentleman I never *did* see, and 'ad 'is bath every morning as regular as you, though after what one

'ears of those nasty trenches one could excuse anybody for contracting dirty 'abits. I'm sorry we're going to lose 'im, I'm sure, for he's been nice company for you and it'll seem dull to sit alone at meals after getting used to somebody to talk to, but there it is! We can't stop the world wagging by setting the clock back. I suppose 'e'll want clothes and all to take with 'im, for you can't spare 'im what 'e's got on. You're short of socks as it is, as I was meaning to tell you, for at the rate you're going, what you *'ave* got are mostly darn. You seem to walk through 'em as easy as a young lady at a circus jumps through a paper 'oop."

"I'll get some more," John said absently. "He's going on Saturday and today's Monday. That's five days from now. He's going to my home, you know."

"What! To live with your Ma?" asked Mrs. Ottoway in astonishment.

"No, not actually to the house I live in, but to one in the same place. He's going to help a gentleman living there with a book he's writing."

"To think of that now, and 'im turning up 'ere in rags. Well I only 'ope 'e can spell," exclaimed Mrs. Ottoway, who appeared to think there was some subtle connection between orthography and the art of dressing well.

"Yes. I think he can," John said. "He was at a public school, you know."

"Well, Ottoway was at a board school but *'e* can't spell, so it don't always follow," observed Mrs. Ottoway pertinently. "We must just 'ope for the best, that's all, for it 'ud be a pity for 'im to lose 'is job through writing down words 'e wasn't meant to."

"It would, wouldn't it?" agreed John gravely.

Roger got back about six o'clock that evening, and a few minutes later, while he was displaying his purchases to John, Mrs. Ottoway appeared at the door, bearing in her hand a volume in a dingy brown cover. She advanced into the room with a hesitancy quite foreign to her usual decided methods, and the two men looked at her in surprise.

"Is anything wrong, Mrs. Ottoway?" John asked anxiously.

"No, there's nothing wrong," said Mrs. Ottoway slowly. "Only it flashed into my mind about this book. Ottoway bought it with a lot of other rubbidge at a sale and I thought maybe — if Mr. Dibden would care — well, 'e might find it useful to 'im in 'is new place — not that I want to take a liberty — but if it 'elped 'im to give satisfaction, I'm sure 'e's most welcome."

She thrust the volume into Roger's hands and fled from the room in confusion.

"Walker's Pronouncing Dictionary," read out Roger solemnly, then lay back in his chair and laughed till the tears rolled down his cheeks.

"All the same," he pronounced, when he had recovered himself, "Mrs. Ottoway's an angel, and I shall take the first opportunity of telling her so."

CHAPTER XI

Biddy, having been duly warned of Roger's impending departure, had written to invite him and John, on the latter's next free day, to lunch, so the following Thursday saw them setting out.

Roger, still dressed in John's gray flannel suit, because the clothes he had purchased in the Brompton Road required some alterations made to them and had not yet been sent home, but, for the rest, clad in garments of his own, was obviously somewhat ill at ease.

The last time he and Biddy had met had been that afternoon in John's room on which occasion he had been painfully aware of the deficiencies of his apparel, and he was feeling very self-conscious and, as he had done when he had first donned uniform, rather conspicuous, a feeling which his neat black and white striped shirt with a collar to match, his plain dark blue silk tie, his Oxford shoes and his black cashmere socks with an unobtrusive mauve clock, did nothing to justify.

John, sitting beside him on the top of the tram which bore them citywards, watching him, out of the corner of his eyes, putting on his gloves only to take them off again, straightening his tie, removing his hat to smooth down his already smooth hair and displaying other signs of acute nervousness, guessed something of what was passing in his mind and set to work to try and reassure him.

"I don't suppose there'll be anybody there besides ourselves, except Miss Bellamy," he said.

Roger looked round at him sharply.

"Who's Miss Bellamy?" he asked suspiciously.

"She was Biddy's governess in old days," John replied. "Now she, Biddy, is a widow, Miss Bellamy has come back to her as sort of — well, with anybody else I should

call it chaperone, only as Biddy is a widow I suppose she doesn't need one."

"Doesn't she?" asked Roger dryly. "Though I'm the last person who has the right to make any comment I should have rather thought she did."

"You'll find out in time that Biddy is a law unto herself," John said, a trifle amused at Roger being the one to pass judgment on Biddy for having thrown convention overboard and admitted him, an unknown quantity at that time, inside her house at an hour when all the other occupants of it were in bed and asleep.

Roger must have gleaned some hint from John's voice that the latter was diverted, for he set his jaw obstinately as he said,

"It's all very fine. I know what you're thinking, but supposing I'd been a wrong 'un, where 'ud Mrs. Rycroft have been then, I should like to know? You may laugh, but I give you my word I lie in bed and sweat when I think of the awful risk she just barged into without giving it a moment's consideration and without so much as turning a hair at the sight of me as I must have appeared then."

"One lies in bed and sweats at such rotten things," observed John adroitly. "One's vitality at two o'clock in the morning isn't constructed to bear heavy weights. It's the hour when churchyards yawn, and one hears burglars in the room below, if one is not too engrossed in making entries on the debit side of one's conscience or numbering one's days."

"What's Miss what's-her-name like?" Roger enquired with a slightly overdone air of nonchalance.

"How d'you mean?"

"Well, is she of the — er — dragon variety?"

John considered.

"No. I shouldn't call her that," he said meditatively. "More of the faithful watch-dog type I think."

"I know. Barks at strangers. Oh Lord!" ejaculated Roger. "D'you think she knows about — me?"

"I really couldn't say," replied John. "Why? Do you mind?"

"I don't mind her knowing I was — what I was, but I think I do rather mind her knowing how Mrs. Rycroft came to make my acquaintance," confessed Roger. "You see," he went on, "if she's at all hidebound, she'll mark me down as a rotter straight away for having dared to cross the threshold that night, and she'll never believe that I was so taken by surprise that I honestly didn't quite realise what was happening until I found myself in the hall with the door shut behind me. Of course I ought to have insisted on going the minute the coast was clear, but I simply hadn't the strength of mind. The fact of the matter was, I suppose, that the contrast between past and present was too much for me. I couldn't resist *wallowing* in luxury. It was like getting into a hot bath after a long cold journey. Once in, I dreaded the thought of getting out again and delayed it to the last possible moment."

"My dear chap, I shouldn't worry myself about it if I were you," John said consolingly. "I've no doubt there are a lot of people who would be profoundly shocked if they knew about it. There are always people ready to condemn on superficial evidence and to put a wrong construction on any situation which deviates the fraction of an inch from the hum-drum path in which their feet are set, but they really don't matter. They have their counterpart in those who support their religious arguments with an isolated verse out of the Bible, light-heartedly ignoring the context which may, and often does, qualify it. You needn't be afraid of Miss Bellamy. She's an understanding sort of person. Even if Biddy has told her, which I very much doubt, she'll reserve judgment until she's seen you and can form her own impressions."

"And supposing they're unfavorable," Roger said in depressed tones.

"They won't be," retorted John decidedly.

It was a comfort to Roger, when he and John were admit-

ted into Mrs. Rycroft's house, to find that Barnby appeared to take him for granted and did not waste a second glance at him, after he had relieved him of his stick and hat.

He wondered with a little secret amusement, what the butler's feelings would be if he ever happened to find out the conditions under which this guest of his mistress had previously entered the house. There was a certain piquancy in the situation which appealed to his sense of humour.

He looked about him with curiosity as Barnby piloted them across the hall to the staircase. The sunshine was streaming in through the two large windows on each side of the front door, making a contact with the world outside. The other night when he had been here it had almost seemed as though there were nothing real beyond the confines of the four walls, as though he and Biddy were the only substantialities in a world of shadows. Except for the one brief period when the policeman had interrupted they had been alone together, and the contrast between his surroundings and those from which he had so lately emerged, had made everything appear unreal and dreamlike.

Biddy and Miss Bellamy were in the drawing room when they were shown in and the former rose from her chair as the door was thrown open and advanced to meet them with outstretched hand.

John observed that Miss Bellamy bestowed upon his companion the same penetrating gaze as she had done with him when he had first been introduced to her, and he wondered what the verdict was to be. He was unable, from her manner, to draw any conclusion as to whether Biddy had told her of the incidents connected with the beginning of her acquaintanceship with Roger, although he fancied he could detect a certain reservation about her as if she were determined not to show any prejudice she might feel. She did not attempt to shake hands with Roger when Biddy introduced him but contented herself with a slight inclina-

tion of the head and John had a shrewd suspicion that Roger also remarked the reservation and put it down to the same cause, for he got rather red and set his jaw in that obstinate curve which was a sign that, as far as he was concerned, the rest of the world might go to the Deuce provided it didn't presume to criticise his actions or interfere with his right to decide his own line of conduct.

Biddy, of course, must have given *some* explanation of Roger's presence today and John wished he knew what it was, for he was terribly afraid of making a *mal à propos* remark which would excite comment on Miss Bellamy's part.

However, it was too late now to discover what it was, so, resigning himself to fate, he went across to where that lady sat and greeted her.

"How are you?" he said.

He was standing between her and Biddy and she took advantage of the fact to grin mischievously up into his face.

"Thank you, I've been in the doctor's hands since I saw you last," she replied, at the same time giving him a little kick on the ankle.

With all that had happened since his last visit John had entirely forgotten the plot which had been hatched on that occasion, but he remembered it now and grinned back.

"Nothing serious, I hope," he said gravely.

"No. Nothing really *serious,*" she returned in like manner. "Just a change needed."

"Oh, yes, John. That reminds me," put in Biddy. "Dr. Neame recommends the North Cornish coast for her. I suppose you don't know of any house to let in about six weeks from now?"

"The doctor forbids me to undertake the long journey at present," said Miss Bellamy with assumed plaintiveness. "He wants to be quite sure his treatment is answering before I leave London, I suppose."

John drilled his features into the expression suitable to the occasion before replying. He didn't much like being

made a party to hoodwinking Biddy in this way but, as matters had gone so far, he couldn't very well give Miss Bellamy away and he tried to console himself and his conscience by reminding himself that it was for Biddy's ultimate good that the scheme had been hatched.

"There's The Windy Mount," he answered. "The people who took it can't use it and they want to sublet, I believe."

"The house we had when we were there before," exclaimed Biddy. "Oh, John! It'll be so different. It makes me rather — frightened. I shall see so many changes."

"I don't think you'll find it changed much since the last time you were down there," John said, wilfully misinterpreting her meaning.

"I don't mean in the place. I mean in myself," she said a little wistfully. "Comparisons are odious. I shall feel as if I've been put back in the window marked 'shop-soiled'! I shall feel like Stevenson did when he wrote 'All that was me is gone.' There's none of old 'Me' left now. I shall realise it so horribly when I get back."

"Nonsense, Biddy," said John emphatically, because he wanted to cover a lurking sense of guilt. "There's plenty of the old 'Me,' as you call it, in you. You'll find it out when you get back and see the — the familiar landmarks," he concluded with a hasty sidelong glance at Miss Bellamy which she elected not to notice, though she was fully aware of it. He had had a lingering hope that she might come to the rescue but evidently she had no intention of doing so for she was apparently engrossed in her knitting and oblivious to the conversation.

John remembered the anecdote of the caviare and presumed that she considered this to be one of the occasions when experience was to teach a salutary lesson without her interference.

All the time this had been going on, Roger had stood there not quite knowing what to do. The talk had drifted

into channels in which he was altogether out of his depth and everybody seemed to have forgotten him. No one had offered him a seat and he didn't like to take one uninvited for fear of appearing to be making himself too much at home in the house of a comparative stranger, so he remained standing where he was, feeling very self-conscious and conspicuous and shy.

It was Biddy who came to his rescue.

"Anyway, it can't possibly be of the slightest interest to Mr. Dibden to listen to this soulful outpouring," she said, turning to him with a little smile. "Besides, I want to hear all about Mr. Peal and the whelks. Isn't it whelks he collects? I believe I remember him. Isn't he the thin person with sandy hair who used to wander about in an aged shooting jacket of indeterminate hue with the striped nether portion of a bathing suit showing below it? He was always my ideal of Robinson Crusoe. Don't you recollect, John, the funny old butler who used to bring him out a basket of provender at one o'clock every day and wander distractedly along the water's edge peering disconsolately among the rocks to try and discover his master? He was known as Man Friday. I needn't tell you I shall call *you* Man Friday, Mr. Dibden, when I meet you down at Porth Ros. I wonder if it'll be one of your jobs to slosh about in pools dressed in a striped bathing suit and a shooting jacket. I shouldn't be in the least surprised if, by this time, Robinson Crusoe had developed into a sort of merman, with shiny green scales where the stripes used to be and an undulating tail instead of the pair of skinny legs that looked more like sticks of celery than human limbs. Oh, dear! Now that I begin to talk about it, it almost makes me hope that I shall find a few pieces of the old Me lying round and be able to fit them together again and enjoy the spectacle of dear Robinson Crusoe holding post mortem on the bodies of obscure shell-fish."

She paused breathlessly and Roger, his shyness dispelled by her flow of nonsense, found himself laughing quite

naturally and forgetting the fact, of which, till this moment, he had been painfully conscious, that the last time he had been admitted to this house he had been a vagrant with his clothes in rags and his feet coming through his boots.

He was probably more conscious of the contrast than Biddy, for she found it difficult to identify this good-looking gentlemanly boy, with his well-cared-for kempt appearance, his tidy clothes which, though they had not been made for him, yet fitted him sufficiently to show off his figure to advantage, his sleek hair rippling back from his forehead, his face, with the somewhat olive complexion, no longer sallow and pinched but glowing with health and vitality — as the tatterdemalion of a fortnight ago, whose patched garments hung loosely from his bent shoulders, who stood badly in need of a visit to a barber, and who gave the impression that life wasn't worth the struggling for and that it would be easier to give in and own himself worsted than to fight on against fearful odds until his inexorable adversary, playing with him as a cat plays with a mouse, saw fit to deal him the knockout blow and put him out of his misery.

The contrast was so pronounced that Biddy felt as though it were impossible that her guest of today should be the same Roger Dibden who had knocked so timidly on her door that night and who had broken down and cried from sheer weariness and desolation at the first little bit of sympathy and kindness that had been shown to him for weeks.

Looking at him as he stood there, the spontaneous laughter issuing from his lips, his eyes sparkling with boyish amusement, Biddy was suddenly overwhelmed with pride in him, not unmixed with a kind of trepidation. *She* was answerable for this transformation, she and John between them. She felt like a mother does who, in one blinding flash, realises that the child, whom she has tended and cared for, is a child no longer, but a man who has no further need of her ministrations, and she experienced, in the minutest degree, that stab of jealousy which a mother

experiences at the supreme moment when she silently bids a last farewell to the child and welcomes, in his stead, the man who is almost a stranger, to her, and who can never quite oust from her mind the memory of what has been and can never be again.

Not that Biddy ever thought of putting her feelings on such a high plane as this. She would have laughed to scorn the bare suggestion that they had anything of the maternal in them in connection with Roger, her junior by three years, but then she did not appreciate the fact that the maternal instinct is implanted in the female breast from the moment that the first rag doll is clasped to it. She was proud, but she was also a little bit frightened. She recollected having read in some old book of a strange old belief which claims that the life of one saved by another from death is no longer his own but the property of the man who has saved it, to do with as he wills.

She had snatched this boy from worse than death. She had rescued him from social and moral disintegration; therefore, if the superstition were true, he belonged to her, was her vassal, her man, for whom she was responsible and whose destiny she had the right to mould if she so desired.

It was only for a brief second that the sensation gripped her but it was long enough for her to know that this man could never be quite the same to her as other men; that he must always stand in a class alone. Their lines had crossed and become entangled and no human power could henceforth separate them. He and she might never meet again but somewhere in the world there would be one whose destiny she had helped to fashion.

With an effort she wrenched herself free from her fanciful thoughts and forced herself to return to the subject of the house at Porth Ros.

"I'll take down the address of that house, John, or rather, the name of the owner of it," she said, going over to the writing table and getting a pencil and a piece of paper. "I've forgotten who it was we took it from."

"You took it from old Thorald Marchant but it belongs to a Mrs. Long now," John told her.

"The Windy Mount! It sounds draughty." Miss Bellamy shivered apprehensively. "*Is* it draughty, Mr. Ffoulkes?"

"I hope you aren't going to tell me that you are beginning to regret your visit to Doctor Neame," John said, grinning meaningly at her.

"I went to Doctor Neame because I thought it necessary, not because I'm one of those silly neurotic females who *enjoy* a visit to a medical man. In the same way I am prepared to sit in a perpetual draught if it's absolutely necessary but I'm not going to pretend I shall like it. Sometimes, Mr. Ffoulkes, it is expedient to suffer in a good cause. The early Christian martyrs did so, I've always been lead to understand, but you'll never make me believe they contemplated the stake or the arena or whatever their particular form of martyrdom was to be with any expectation of getting some enjoyment out of it."

"Fancy, in this heat, objecting to anything cooling," exclaimed Biddy, as she noted the name of the owner of The Windy Mount and tucked away the paper inside the front of her dress. "Come out on to the balcony, Mr. Dibden, and get a breath of fresh air before we go down to lunch."

She led the way out through the open French window with Roger following and when they were gone Miss Bellamy turned to John.

"Is that attractive young man the one Biddy met the other day at your rooms when she elected to rush off and have tea with you at five minutes' notice?" she asked.

John countered the question with another.

"Do you find him attractive? I somehow fancied you didn't catch on to him."

"What makes you think that I didn't 'catch on to him' as you elegantly express it?"

"Well, you didn't seem to have much to say to him."

"What does one talk about to a strange young man of whom one knows nothing? I hate obvious remarks about the weather; I haven't an idea of the direction in which his tastes lie, and I couldn't ask after his mother because I don't even know if he possesses such a thing."

"Besides which, he's no use as a landmark," suggested John with malice aforethought.

Miss Bellamy regarded him critically.

"Why are you so anxious for me to catch on to him?" she asked.

John considered for a moment, then extracted two pennies from his pocket and solemnly handed them to Miss Bellamy who examined them through her glasses with bewilderment as though it were the first time she had ever seen such a thing as a copper coin.

"What's that for?" she enquired, not attempting to take them from him.

"'When I come again I will repay thee,'" quoted John.

Miss Bellamy looked up at him quickly.

"I do wish you wouldn't talk in hieroglyphics," she said impatiently. "Is it a bribe or what?"

"It's a symbol," John informed her gravely. "A certain man, if you remember, went down from Jerusalem to Jericho and fell among thieves."

A light dawned upon Miss Bellamy.

"Do you mean that boy? Is he a 'certain man'?"

John nodded.

"And you set him on your beast?" she went on.

"No. I was the beast he was set on — by Biddy. Oh, a very willing beast, I can assure you," he concluded hastily in case she should misinterpret his meaning. "I bore him gladly to the inn."

"It appears to be rather a mixed metaphor," observed Miss Bellamy. "I don't recollect ever having read that the beast took out two pence. And when, pray, did Biddy pass that way? She never mentioned anything about it to me."

"Then, no doubt, she didn't wish you to know anything about it," John rejoined with promptitude. "Don't let her guess I told you."

"That's all very well, but it doesn't explain why you cast me for the part of host," objected Miss Bellamy. "What's my line of conduct to be?"

"Just to take care of him when you meet him, as you are bound to do, at Porth Ros. That boy is one of the most terribly lonely people I know, and loneliness isn't natural at his age. It's fraught with many and great dangers. When there's nobody much to care whether you sink or swim it's so much easier to float with the tide, and if the tide happens to be going out—" He stopped, and made an expressive gesture with his hands.

Miss Bellamy gave a backward glance in the direction of the French window through which Roger and Biddy were visible on the balcony. Roger was leaning with his back against the balustrade supporting himself by the palms of his hands which were pressed down on the top of the stone coping. His head was thrown back and he was laughing at some remark of Biddy's who stood facing him.

"The tide doesn't appear to be going out very rapidly," Miss Bellamy observed dryly.

"Let's hope it's on the turn," John said.

"Let's hope so," agreed Miss Bellamy. "In any case, I still don't see where I come in. As far as I can make out I'm a mere superfluity. I fulfill no useful purpose."

"On the contrary, you fulfill a very useful purpose," John assured her.

"What is it then?" she asked.

John hesitated a moment before replying.

"When people are very young," he said at length, speaking slowly and deliberately, "they're sometimes rather apt to resent criticism from their contemporaries which they would accept willingly from those older than themselves. I'm very fond of Roger but he's an obstinate beggar and as independent as they make 'em. This job he's going

to is only temporary and at the end of five or six months he'll have to be looking round for another."

"My dear Mr. Ffoulkes! I sincerely hope you aren't expecting me to find him another."

"No. Not that," John said. "But I want you to try and gain his confidence. You can, if you like, you know. Get him to talk to you about things and stop him from flying off at a tangent. He's the kind of chuckle-headed young ass who'll sacrifice everything to his beastly pride and slip away without a word sooner than hoist a signal of distress. That sort will never believe that there are others *glad* to help them. They insist on regarding themselves as harpies and parasites whenever any practical sympathy is shown to them. Because it isn't in their power to give they deny that blessing to anybody else and refuse to acknowledge that true charity is not puffed up. It was a difficult enough job to persuade Roger to be set on the beast the first time; it'll be an impossible one the second unless he's gradually worked up to the idea."

"And you choose me for the post of preceptor. Why me? Why not Biddy?"

A low ripple of laughter came in through the open window.

"That's why," John said, nodding his head in the direction whence the sound came. "One doesn't put one child out of a class to teach the rest of them."

"So the decayed governess is called in."

John shook his head.

"Not the decayed governess," he said. "Let's call it the spare mother."

A little smile, half whimsical, half wistful, played like a flicker of light on Miss Bellamy's lips for a moment then died away again.

"I'm afraid that sounds too mechanical to ring quite true. It is reminiscent of motor cars and incubators and other man-made contrivances," she said ruefully. "Why not say a broody hen while you're about it? A broody hen

spends a perfectly beastly time sitting on another hen's eggs and when they hatch out fondly imagines that the chicks are hers and that she alone is responsible for them. Well, I'm prepared to sit on Mr. Dibden if you wish it but I can't promise that he'll hatch out."

"He's not a bad egg, if that's what you're hinting at," put in John hastily.

"I'm not hinting at anything," said Miss Bellamy. "I don't know enough about him to pass an opinion one way or the other."

John regarded her critically.

"You're prejudiced against him. I wonder why," he said reflectively.

"I'm not prejudiced in the least," she maintained. "I'm merely wondering where he fits into our scheme or whether he fits in at all. You must, in justice to me, bear in mind that I am completely ignorant of the circumstances connected with this young man's sudden appearance upon the scenes. No doubt there is some excellent reason for reticence on the subject but the fact remains that he is something of a mystery and, being so, one naturally conjectures about him. I feel I am behaving in rather a Panterish manner but, if I am, you're the one to blame."

There was a long pause during which Miss Bellamy knitted vigorously while John stood by, devoutly wishing that Biddy had had the courage of her convictions and had made a clean breast of the whole affair. He sympathized with Miss Bellamy's feelings in the matter but it did seem rather hard that he should be held responsible, and he was debating how to exculpate himself without involving Biddy when she broke the silence.

"I'm a detestable old woman," she suddenly said. "Forgive me, Mr. Ffoulkes, for being so silly. I begin to suspect that unsatisfied curiosity has something to do with it. You see, Biddy has always told me everything and trusted me, so I daresay I felt a little hurt at being kept out of her counsels on this occasion. I sometimes forget that she's no

longer the child I guarded and cared for fifteen years ago but a grown woman. I suppose the older one grows the harder it is to shake off a habit and it's one of my habits to look on Biddy as a charge, so I find it difficult to realise that she has the perfect right to shut me out of anything she chooses and that I have not the right to complain. Here's a sporting offer, Mr. Ffoulkes. I'll accept your protégé at your valuation if you will tell me candidly what that is."

"I don't mind doing that," John said. "You can take my word for it that he's all right. In the first place he's a gentleman, and when I say that, I don't just mean that he knows how to eat properly and has a bath and no accent. I mean that he's a gentleman in the truest sense of the word. Do you remember when I was dining here a fortnight ago that we got on to the subject of ethics, and somebody, myself I believe it was, propounded the theory that a starving duke, if he found himself in a baker's shop with nobody looking, wouldn't hesitate to steal a loaf? Well, I was mistaken. Nine dukes out of ten might succumb but the tenth wouldn't because his principles, or, if you like the word better, his gentlemanly instincts would prevail. Roger's the tenth duke."

"You're very sure of him and I like you for defending him but your theory requires putting into practice before it can have any real value," Miss Bellamy said.

"It has been."

"What! Do you mean to tell me that that experience has literally been Mr. Dibden's? You can't expect me to swallow that. Come now!"

"A parallel experience has been his," insisted John stubbornly. "He *was* starving and he picked up an ornament of some considerable value the sale of which (and he could easily have disposed of it without risk) would have provided him with not one loaf only but hundreds. The ornament had not been missed; there was no one by to interfere; he had only to walk away and say nothing. But, although

sorely tempted his gentlemanly instincts prevailed and compelled him, against his will, to restore it to its owner. That's why I call him the tenth duke."

"The owner being Biddy," remarked Miss Bellamy in tones of certainty. "I begin to see daylight, Mr. Ffoulkes, though I still am at a loss to understand why the whole affair has been treated in such a mysterious manner. However, that's neither here nor there. I'll do my share, though if Mr. Dibden refuses to confide in me I don't very well see how I can prevent him from acting in whatever way he chooses. At the best I can only indicate the road he should follow. I can't take him by the scruff of the neck and drag him down it against his will."

"No. I certainly can't imagine him responding to violent treatment," agreed John. "And yet I don't know! I've given it to him pretty straight from the shoulder when occasion required and it seems to have answered."

"Well, I can only do my best but please understand that I accept no responsibility in the matter," said Miss Bellamy decidedly.

"I don't ask you to. I merely ask you to stand by and give him a helping hand if necessary," said John.

"I will if he stretches out his first. I'm not going to grab at him."

"To change the subject, how's Mrs. Panter?" enquired John.

"Much as usual," responded Miss Bellamy tartly. "But you'll be able to judge for yourself if you don't hurry away after lunch."

"Why? Is she coming here?"

"She's calling for Biddy at three to drive down to Ranelagh with her. Not having a car of her own she finds Biddy's extremely useful."

"What a lark," said John. "We'll introduce Roger to her."

The sound of the gong for lunch booming through the house interrupted any further conversation. The two on

the balcony came in and the whole party proceeded downstairs to the dining room. During the course of the meal John caught Miss Bellamy more than once looking speculatively at Roger as though she were trying to fill up the gaps in the somewhat sparse narrative of the events which had led up to his presence at Biddy's table, but otherwise she simply treated him as she would have treated any other guest in the house whom she was meeting for the first time.

Conversation was a little difficult because Roger had lost touch with the current topics of the day and had been debarred for so long from either seeing popular plays or reading the books which everyone was discussing that to talk of them was to leave him out of it altogether so they sought refuge in the future, making plans for the projected visit to Cornwall, dwelling on the charms of the coast scenery and enlarging generally on the delights of the free and easy life led by those dwelling in that favoured spot, until John was thoroughly homesick and even Biddy expressed a longing for the time to come when she would find herself once more in the old familiar surroundings.

"What fun when you come down for your holiday, John," she said, her eyes sparkling with excitement. "Think of the walk along the top of the cliffs to Ferrier Bay and Dunning Porth."

"And beyond to Randall Stairs and Hinxman Head with that view right down the coast to St. Ives," chimed in John ecstatically.

"Oh, don't let's talk about it. It makes me squirm."

"We're evidently outside the pale, Mr. Dibden," observed Miss Bellamy. "We're mere novices. I don't think it's fair that you should have six weeks' advantage over me. You'll be an experienced squirmer by the time I arrive and will be able to look down on me from the superior altitudes in which you blissfully wriggle."

"How priceless," Roger said. "But of course I'll give you tips. I might even arrange for a few lessons at a reduced price under the circumstances."

"Don't pay any attention to them, Biddy," John admonished her. "They're trying to get a rise out of us so let's treat them with the contempt they deserve. Poor things! We must remember that they don't know any better."

"It's pathetic, isn't it?" Biddy said. "Let's go upstairs to the drawing room and sulk."

It was all rather childish and silly nonsense but it just suited the slightly awkward situation in which they found themselves and helped Roger to find his feet and slip quite naturally into his proper place again, and by the time they got upstairs once more he had almost forgotten he had ever been in the house in any other capacity than that of acknowledged guest.

The next hour passed so pleasantly and rapidly that it came upon them as a surprise when Barnby threw open the door and announced Mrs. Panter.

That lady paused on the threshold for an instant when she saw the two men but recovering herself immediately advanced into the room, embraced Biddy effusively, shook hands reservedly with Miss Bellamy, bowed graciously to John, then hesitated, obviously waiting for an explanation of Roger's presence. These strange young men, who were unknown in the circles in which she moved, and who followed one another in such rapid succession in Biddy's drawing room were a little disconcerting. John had been accounted for on a previous occasion but Roger still remained to be elucidated. Her practiced eye told her at a glance that he was different from the usual run of men whom she was accustomed to meet in Biddy's house and she was vaguely disquieted by the knowledge. She had, as it were, staked her claim on Biddy on her brother's behalf and, if Biddy herself was ignorant of the fact, the youths in her set were not and they, from some extraordinary code of honour of their own, respected the claim. But these stray young men who came from nobody knew where, and on whom Mrs. Panter was unable to keep a watchful eye, were potential disturbers of the peace and therefore suspects.

Roger was introduced in the usual form and Mrs. Panter acknowledged the introduction in an offhand manner which forcibly reminded John of the reception accorded to him by the lady at their first meeting a fortnight ago.

"Aren't you ready, Biddy?" she asked with a note of impatience in her tones. "It's three o'clock, you know, and we arranged to start punctually."

That she was taking Biddy away from her guests didn't trouble her in the least. She couldn't allow a trifle like that to interfere with her plans. Young men, especially nondescript young men, who came to luncheon and didn't know when to go must be shown plainly and without compunction that they had out-stayed their welcome even though it was not her own house and they were not her own guests. She wasn't going to stand idly by and see dear Biddy put upon.

"I'm awfully sorry, Carrie," Biddy said apologetically. "You see we were making plans for Cornwall and I never noticed how the time was slipping by."

"Plans for Cornwall? What plans for Cornwall?" asked Mrs. Panter suspiciously. It was the first she had heard of them.

"Why the doctor's ordered Belle there and Mr. Ffoulkes knows of a house to let at his home, and funnily enough Mr. Dibden is going to the same place the day after tomorrow, so, when Mr. Ffoulkes goes home for his holiday we shall all meet there," explained Biddy.

This was even worse than Mrs. Panter had feared and she very nearly lost her head and said so but she managed to pull herself together in the nick of time and murmur a suitable platitude.

"Where *is* your home, Mr. Ffoulkes?" she enquired sweetly, feeling it might be well to know with a view to future emergencies.

"About a half mile out of Hine," John responded with what politeness he could muster.

"Hine. Really," said Mrs. Panter, making a mental note

of the name. "Isn't that the place one sees photographs of at Paddington?"

"One used to. I rather think they took them away during the war. I suppose they thought the Germans would be unable to resist its attractions if they occupied London so they'd better hide them," John told her.

"Dear me! If it's as attractive as all that I must pay it a visit one of these days. What's the best hotel?"

John gave her the desired information with a sense of guilt which was justified when Biddy and Mrs. Panter had driven off and he and Roger were bidding Miss Bellamy adieu.

"Now you've torn it," she said scornfully. Miss Bellamy, after years of self-repression in the vulgar tongue inculcated by a sense of duty to those who looked to her to impart the elegancies of the English language to their offspring, had deliberately let herself go when the need of restraint was past and was an adept at picking up and applying intelligently any slang she happened to come across to the stupefaction of her listeners.

"What did you want to go and give her the name of a hotel for?"

"How could I help it?" John said indignantly. "She'd have found out for herself if I hadn't told her."

"Well I suppose she would," Miss Bellamy acquiesced grudgingly. "We must just make the best of a bad job, that's all."

"Perhaps she won't come," suggested John hopefully.

"I don't think," retorted Miss Bellamy laconically.

CHAPTER XII

Roger started off for Cornwall on the Saturday morning feeling rather like a small boy going to a new school.

John had not been able to come to Paddington to see him off, as he would have liked to do, so their farewells took place in the little sitting room in Eddis Street where their first momentous interview had happened.

It was hard to realise that it was only just over a fortnight since that afternoon when they two and Biddy had sat at tea there and conversed labouriously with one another in a futile endeavour to make an extraordinary situation appear ordinary, but in friendship, as in love, time is of no account and its strength is not to be reckoned by days or hours. The two who had been brought together under such peculiar circumstances were content to acknowledge that each of them recognised in the other the complement of himself, and they did not seek to reduce it to terms of mensuration.

Perhaps if they had met under different conditions their affection for one another would not have matured so rapidly but, as it was, Roger had been more or less forced to unburden himself to this man who had dragged him out of the mire and in the laying bare of his own soul he had learned to understand John's in a way which months of casual acquaintanceship would not have taught him.

And John, on his side, was strangely drawn towards this young man who had walked into his life so unexpectedly. The fact that there was a difference of eight years between their respective ages had not prevented a very real camaraderie springing to birth.

John had, all his life, been singularly bereft of friends of his own sex. An only child, he had never known what it was to possess a brother and at school and college though he had scores of comrades whom he had liked well enough

he had never found a Pythias to whom he was Damon. Certainly there had been special companions with whom he had exchanged confidences and stamps but somehow these companionships had not lasted. There had been a certain lack of spontaneity about them. They had mostly been the outcome of environment backed up by concession to custom. It was the thing to have an *alter ego* so John had cast around as occasion required until he found someone sufficiently sympathetic to fill the post but these successive friendships had resembled a marriage of convenience rather than a union of souls and, one by one, had died a natural death.

But in his feelings toward Roger, John recognised a driving force which his other friendships had wanted. For one thing, being Roger's senior gave him a sense of protectiveness towards the younger man and, for another, Roger's state of utter loneliness appealed to him. And above all there was that intuition of mutual affection which has existed since the days of David and Jonathan and doubtless had its counterpart long before that. Their parting had been typically British. Where two Frenchmen would have fallen on one another's necks and embraced with tears they had merely shaken hands rather awkwardly and talked about the times of trains and the convenience of their being a luncheon car on this particular one.

Mrs. Ottoway had displayed far more sentiment than John at Roger's departure. She insisted on regarding him as a sort of Cinderella who, directly he had left the shelter of her roof, would shed his fine feathers and find himself again in the ragged garments he had worn when she first set eyes on him and there was even a hint of reproach in her manner towards John as being the one responsible for his going away.

Her feelings expended themselves in preparing endless packages of food for Roger to comfort himself with on the journey. A couple of hours in a train was, to her, an event. Seven hours was an epoch! She seemed to have

an idea that Roger, at the end of so much travelling, would inevitably be landed in some desert spot in which the decencies of life would be conspicuous by their absence and the only consolation she could derive was in the reflection that, having experienced the hardships of the trenches, he would be inured, to a certain extent, to the worse hardships of the coast of Cornwall, which of course was quite unreasonable considering she was perfectly aware that John's home was there and that every time he went there for his holiday he performed exactly the same journey. But then John had a mother with, presumably, a roof over her head to afford him shelter, whereas, from the conversations she had overheard between John and Roger, she had gathered the impression that the latter was setting out to spend a miserable existence in a water-logged hut perched on a rock out at sea.

John had just said, "Well, good-bye, old chap. See you when I come down. Give my love to my mother and Aunt Sybil." To which Roger had responded, "So long, old man, and — thanks awfully."

That had been all and then the taxi had driven off leaving John standing on the doorstep looking after it with an assumed air of indifference which gave no indication of the real feelings beneath the surface, while Mrs. Ottoway retired to her own domain sniffing in a manner that bade fair to out-rival Amelia and spent the rest of the morning singing "Fierce raged the tempest o'er the deep" in such a lugubrious voice that John was nearly driven distracted and retaliated by whistling airs from "Pinafore" to try and drown it.

Roger, meanwhile, being borne swiftly along through the sun-bathed country towards his new employer and the mollusca of the Cornish coast, was endeavouring, though without much success, to imagine what his life would be for the next few months.

As far as he could make out he would be expected to turn himself into a kind of amphibious creature spending his

waking hours in pools and holes in the rocks and only returning to dry land for the purpose of sleeping. He had visions of sitting waist-deep in water, with a typewriter balanced on a ledge in front of him, jotting down notes on the manners and customs of shell-fish society, as dictated to him by Mr. Peal in a striped bathing suit. It would be rather like that occasion when he had been home on leave and had run across his colonel in the Turkish Baths in Jermyn Street and had great searchings of heart as to whether a superior officer minus his clothes would insist, under the circumstances, on supporting the dignity of the British Army and expect to be addressed as "Sir." Until that moment Roger never realised the debt a colonel owed to his uniform. This particular one was, in the flesh, singularly wanting in dignity, and meeting one of his subalterns on the common grounds of humanity shrank, or, since he was inclined to stoutness, it might be more correct to say expanded, into comparative insignificance.

Roger felt it would be difficult to treat an employer clad in a shooting coat and a striped bathing suit with the deference due to his exalted position and he trusted Mr. Peal was not a stickler for etiquette.

Exeter and Plymouth were passed and at last the express reached Gillett where the through carriage for Hine was attached to the slow train which puffed and panted and labouriously climbed the steep ascent which wound its way up from the Goodson valley to Sully Moor, with its huge white dumps of china clay standing up against the blue sky behind, looking, at a distance, like giant tents.

Hine at last, and Roger, although it brought him to the last stage of his journey to the unknown, welcomed the release from the cramped confines of a crowded railway carriage.

He descended to the platform and looked about him with curiosity. He had been told that he would be met at the station but he had no idea who would be the one to welcome him, whether Mr. Peal himself or a substitute.

He was not long left in doubt, for, before he reached the exit, a voice from behind said over his shoulder, "Mr. Dibden?" and turning he beheld an extraordinary looking individual dressed in a baggy suit of ginger colour, very much faded and stained, a shirt of army gray flannel with a turn down collar of the same material, an obviously made-up tie of black silk which, not being properly pulled up, hung limply down showing a gap of about an inch between it and the collar stud, and, perched on the very top of his sandy hair, one of those weird caps of an obsolete pattern which used to be known as deer-stalkers. Large gold-rimmed spectacles covered a pair of watery blue eyes and a drooping straggly moustache hid the mouth. The first impression the face gave was of weakness bordering on imbecility but, in spite of that, there was something so friendly and cordial about it that it disarmed criticism.

"My name's Peal," continued the owner of the face, after Roger had acknowledged his identity, in tones so humble and deprecating that the younger man felt almost inclined to tell him not to worry about it. He held out a hesitating hand as he spoke, then withdrew it hurriedly, before Roger had time to take it, as though he were afraid of appearing too presumptious, and, instead, seized hold of his new secretary's suit case.

"Pray allow me," he said in a voice of such entreaty that Roger, who had at first protested, graciously permitted his employer to carry his luggage for him while he himself walked unencumbered.

It was certainly a reversal of the usual order of things, Roger reflected, as he followed Mr. Peal down the platform. He had made up his mind to the acceptance of a subservient position in which he would be at the beck and call of one who would issue orders which he would have to obey, and he was quite prepared to efface himself as much as possible when his services were not required, yet here was the one in question servilely acting as baggage carrier, while he marched behind like a gentleman of leisure.

"I've got a jingle," Mr. Peal announced, when they had passed the barrier.

For one wild moment Roger imagined that a jingle must be some rare kind of shell-fish which Mr. Peal had discovered, so triumphant were the tones in which the announcement was made, and he was on the point of embarking upon a congratulatory speech when he realised that a jingle was not a denizen of the shore but a conveyance in the shape of a governess-cart which was destined to carry him and his belongings to Porth Ros, and he breathed a sigh of relief that he had not, at the first outset, betrayed his crass ignorance on the subject of molluscs.

The driver, Mr. Peal, and Roger, packed in, with Roger's bag occupying the vacant seat, and off they started.

Leaving the station approach they swung to the right, in the opposite direction to the main body of the town, and drove along a broad road with the sea sparkling at the foot of the high cliffs on their left, and, on their right, a row of semi-detached villas, mostly private hotels and boarding establishments until, about a quarter of a mile beyond the last house, they turned inland.

"I thought your house was close to the sea," Roger ventured to remark.

"We are only making a detour," Mr. Peal assured him anxiously. "We go off to the left again presently. The Rise is at the bottom of the hill leading to the Porth," he added with unconscious Hibernicism.

And sure enough, before they had gone a mile, the jingle took a byroad to the left and, after going down a steep hill between high hedge rows, reached the gate of The Rise.

The house stood on a kind of plateau, a gaunt square building of no architectural merit but possessing an air of homeliness which helped to redeem its ugliness.

They walked up the short drive, Mr. Peal once again insisting on playing the part of porter, to Roger's extreme discomfiture, and long before they arrived at the front door

it was opened by an aged retainer whom Roger recognised from John's description as the butler, Harcourt.

If Mr. Peal's attire was peculiar, the servant's was, although shabby and old-fashioned, exactly correct in every detail. He was very old; so old and tottery that Roger wondered he didn't fall over. He was bald, except for a few white hairs carefully arranged to spread over as much of his shiny cranium as possible, and his toothless gums had caused his mouth to sink in until it was nothing but a recess below his beaky nose.

Roger had had some qualms as to the reception he was likely to meet with from the trio of ancients who formed the nucleus of the establishment, and he was therefore rather relieved when the butler welcomed him with a cavernous grin which irresistibly reminded him of the spasms which convulse the face of an infant when it is suffering from wind.

He was ushered up to a bedroom on the first floor. It was furnished in early Victorian style. A four-post bed, hung with curtains of maroon damask, faced the window. The dressing table had a valance of spotted muslin over a pink foundation hanging round it and reaching to the floor with a massive mahogany mirror surmounting it and occupying most of the top surface. An enormous marble-topped double washstand stood in one corner, an escritoire in another, and the chairs were evidently the surplus of a dining room suite upholstered in velvet of a hideous browny-green hue. A Brussells carpet, with red roses sprawling over a drab ground, covered the floor and the walls were adorned with a white paper plentifully sprinkled with gold stars. Curtains, to match those on the bed, hung at the one window of which the room boasted and the only picture was a print of " Dignity and Impudence," which decorated the space above the fireplace.

It was not what you might call an exhilarating room but it had an air of solid comfort about it which Roger appreciated and when he went across to the window and saw

the view from it he drew in his breath with a gasp of delight for there, before his eyes, was a scene of such beauty and grandeur that it almost seemed too good to be true.

The tide was out but the Porth was a stretch of golden sand shining in the sunlight. On the further side of it the headland, rosy with sea-pinks, glowed like a lambent jewel against the background of restless blue-green water which showed above it, while far away in the distance, a steamer appeared on the skyline, its trail of smoke floating out behind like a gray veil, as it ploughed through the ocean bearing its freight homewards. The steamer gave just the requisite touch of realism to the picture, linking it up with the work-a-day world. It seemed at once to make the beauty of the sea and sky, of granite cliffs and amethystine headland, a personal possession in which all mankind had a share, and brought within the grasp of intellect that which otherwise might have appeared too remotely sublime to be fully understood by the human mind.

It was Harcourt who broke the spell.

"If I may have your key, Sir, I'll get out your things," he said.

"What time's dinner?" Roger asked.

"Eight o'clock, Sir. It's half past six now."

"Does — does Mr. Peal dress?"

"Well, Sir. It depends on the tide," was the surprising reply.

"The tide!" exclaimed Roger.

"Mr. Peal stops down on the beach till the last possible moment, Sir, if the rocks are get-at-able," explained the old servant. "But Mrs. Ffoulkes and Miss Gunning are dining here. To meet you, Sir. They're anxious for the latest news of Mr. John."

"Miss Gunning is Mrs. Ffoulkes' sister, I suppose?"

"Yes, Sir."

Roger left Harcourt to unpack for him and descending the stairs made his way out of doors and down to the shore.

The Porth, now that he saw it from the level of the sands,

was a deep inlet with promontories running out on either hand into the sea. That on the left was evidently the grounds of a private house while that on the opposite side appeared to be available for public use for there were scattered groups of people sauntering about on it. Across the mouth of the bay the heavy Atlantic rollers were breaking on the shore, one suceeding another with such rapidity that their white crests formed a seemingly unbroken line blotting out the horizon and, where they struck the rocks, sending up a shower of spray like diamonds. Gulls circled in the air and clustered in groups at the edge of the incoming tide, uttering strident cries and piercing the roar of the waves with warnings of the approach of an enemy.

For the first time Roger dimly comprehended John's sick longing for the sights and sounds of this place when he compared it with the sights and sounds of the great city in which he had suffered so much and in which he had been so near to destruction.

Less than three weeks ago he had been a wanderer upon the face of the earth; an Ishmael with his hand against every man and every man's hand against him. Now he was one of the elect, the heir to a more wonderful heritage than he could ever have imagined — a heritage of illimitable spaces, of boundless ocean tracks canopied with blue skies and feathery white clouds, of towering cliffs and golden sands, of green fields and country lanes where the foxgloves raised purple spires heavenwards.

He could have shouted out loud with the ecstacy that poured over him like a flood; indeed only the near presence of a severe looking old lady, unsuitably attired in a bonnet and beaded mantle, restrained him. He felt she would never understand if he did such a thing and would merely regard him with deep misgivings as to his sanity or sobriety. She was so entirely out of harmony with her surroundings that the vision of her sitting bolt upright on a camp stool rather damped his ardour. He felt inclined to go up to her and

say, "Are you aware, Madam, that you are trespassing?" only he knew she wouldn't see the joke.

So he checked his impulse to behave like a riotous schoolboy and retraced his steps to the house in a decorous manner as befitted one who was about to engage in scientific research.

He dressed for dinner with an accurate care for the most minute details of his toilette and with a sense of well-being which had for long been foreign to him.

It seemed absurd to realise that the clothes he was putting on were the very first grown up evening ones he had ever possessed but so it was. He had gone straight from school into the army and after his demobilization had been too hard up to be able to afford a luxury for which he would have very little use, so it was excusable in him to examine himself with a certain amount of interest in the glass when he had completed his change of attire.

It was only a dinner jacket he was wearing, it is true, but he found the result eminently satisfactory, though he was not, as a rule, given to self-adulation, and he went down stairs with a new-born confidence begotten of the consciousness that at any rate he looked presentable. Mrs. Ffoulkes and her sister had already arrived and Mr. Peal was entertaining them with an exposition on oyster beds, when Roger entered the room, to which the two ladies were listening with an air of strained attention.

They were so utterly unlike one another in appearance that it was almost impossible to believe they were related.

Mrs. Ffoulkes was short and stout and comfortable looking while Miss Gunning was tall and thin and angular.

The former was attired in a black silk dress and on her head was a widow's cap with long streamers upon which she invariably sat and which had to be extricated from beneath her; the latter wore a gown of some thin material, also black, which was finished off round the neck with a ruching of white net. A small v-shaped opening at the front hinted with the utmost delicacy at décolletage and produced

an effect of compromise. It conceded, without overstepping the bounds of decorum in the slightest degree.

Mrs. Ffoulkes, who never exerted herself more than was absolutely necessary, extended a plump hand in Roger's direction as he entered and held it poised in mid-air until he crossed to where she sat, in a well-padded armchair, and took it.

"Welcome to Porth Ros, Mr. Dibble," she said graciously. "My son has told me of you."

Roger hesitated, wondering whether to correct her perversion of his name, but, deciding that it was really of no consequence, let it pass.

"Thank you very much, Mrs. Ffoulkes," he said gratefully. "Your son has been very kind to me."

"Dear John," said Mrs. Ffoulkes comfortably. "How did he seem?"

"Very well indeed," Roger assured her.

"*That's* all right," she remarked complaisantly. "It makes me so anxious to think of him in London in this sweltering heat."

All the same her anxiety wasn't so great as to distract her attention from a spot of grease she had discovered on her dress at which she scrabbled with the nail of her forefinger while she enquired after her son's health. It was Miss Gunning, Roger noticed, who seemed the more relieved of the two to hear that John was well and he wondered whether, in spite of her gaunt weather-beaten appearance, she was not, after all, the softer-hearted of the two.

Mrs. Ffoulkes was one of those happily constituted people who, provided they are comfortable themselves, don't trouble about other people. She spent the major portion of her time in a softly-cushioned armchair from the depths of which she complained of the strenuous existence she led and of how she never had a moment to call her own, although, since her sister ran the household and undertook all the business correspondence and mended the linen and darned the stockings for both of them, besides fulfilling any social

duties and parochial obligations which devolved upon them, it was hard to say where the strenuous existence came in. Having, as a young woman, suffered from a weak chest she had gained an altogether undeserved reputation for delicacy which was not without its compensations since it enabled her to breakfast in bed every morning and not come down stairs till mid-day, have a fire in her bedroom, odd cups of soup or hot milk or arrowroot brought to her at frequent intervals, and to refuse any invitations which she fancied would bore her, though if she happened to be asked out to anything she thought would be entertaining, she quickly discovered that a little stimulus was needed to " take her out of herself."

Her delicacy had become such a tradition that no one ever thought of questioning it and her greatest joy in life was to sit surrounded by a ring of sympathising friends and listen to their admiring plaudits on her marvelous fortitude in rising superior to her bodily ailments. She would go miles and put herself to any amount of personal inconvenience in order to achieve this object and when, in addition, she was patted on the back for doing what she thoroughly enjoyed her cup of contentment was filled to overflowing. It is always pleasant to be commended for an action which is also a source of gratification to oneself.

On this occasion she had condescended to dine with Mr. Peal partly because a stranger always excited her curiosity and whetted her appetite for enlisting a fresh recruit into the ranks of those who regarded her as one bravely struggling against adversity and partly because, although she had unbounded confidence in John's ability to look after himself and did not really worry herself in the slightest degree about his health, she was genuinely fond of him and was anxious to meet one who had come straight from sojourning under his roof and had seen him as recently as that morning. No doubt if her son had been ill she would have been upset but as he was not her enquiries about him were merely

perfunctory ones the answers to which she knew before they were given.

Her sister, on the other hand, who never gave her own well-being a moment's thought, allowed her imagination full play where those she cared for were concerned, and especially when she was not on the spot to mark their looks and assure herself that their appetites were good and that they were displaying no symptoms of immediate dissolution.

During the hot weather she invariably worked herself into a state of morbid terror as to the effect the heat might be having on her nephew. She saw him, in her mind's eye, a pale languid wreck of his former self, crawling feebly round the courts and alleys of the East End (she refused to believe that the whole of John's parish was not composed of courts and alleys in spite of his assurances to the contrary), an easy prey to the first germ that he might encounter; fainting in church in the middle of the service from exhaustion, and otherwise comporting himself in a manner about as far removed from the truth as it well could be. Therefore to get a report of John first hand from one who had come direct from him was a very real comfort to his aunt and meant that, for tonight at least, she need not lie awake picturing to herself all kinds of disasters.

She asked no questions herself. That was the mother's prerogative and if Mrs. Ffoulkes was satisfied to let the matter end with the bare statement that John was very well it was not for her to pursue the subject further. She knew what was due to her sister.

"So you're going to write another book about crabs and things, dear Mr. Peal," Mrs. Ffoulkes said vaguely to her host when, dinner over, they returned to the drawing room. "And Mr. Dibble is going to help you. How very interesting and how delightful to be able to stand about for hours in the water without feeling any ill effects. Such a nice hobby."

If Mr. Peal had been anything but the mildest of men he would, at this point, have exploded with wrath to hear what

he considered his life's mission described as a " nice hobby."

However, being what he was, he only got purple in the face with emotion and blinked at Mrs. Ffoulkes as though she were some strange thing which he could hardly credit even with the testimony of his own eyes.

" I'm not proposing to write a book about crabs and things," he said at last, when he had gained sufficient self-control to speak. " The volume upon which I am about to engage deals exclusively with univalves and more especially with Fissurellidæ. It will also embody my little pamphlet on the Buccinum Undatum which I published last year."

Mrs. Ffoulkes, not being concerned with the volume in question and having nothing to lose by a display of ignorance, put the question point blank which Roger was longing but had not dared to ask.

" What's a Fizzy what-you-may-call-it?" she enquired vaguely.

" A limpet, Madam, a limpet," Mr. Peal informed her with the nearest approach to irritation that Roger had yet seen in him.

" Oh, is that all?" observed Mrs. Ffoulkes in some disappointment. She had expected something in the nature of a sea-serpent at the very least.

" And quite enough, too," declared Mr. Peal emphatically. To sit calmly by and listen without protest to this disparagement of one of his beloved mollusca was beyond his powers of endurance, and he forthwith plunged into an abstruse and highly scientific account of the limpet of which not one of his unwilling audience of three understood a word, so bristling was it with technicalities.

Roger, with a deep conviction of his own unworthiness, was thankful when ten o'clock came and the two ladies rose to make their adieux.

" You must come and see me," Mrs. Ffoulkes said graciously, as she bade him good night. " And I'll show you some photographs of John when he was a baby," she added as an inducement.

"I should like to see them," Roger said with studied politeness. "As a matter of fact I was coming along tomorrow morning if you didn't mind. Your son told me I could borrow his bathing suit until he came home."

"I'm sure I don't know where it is," remarked Mrs. Ffoulkes hopelessly.

"I do, Kathleen," interposed her sister hastily. "What time will you come for it, Mr. Dibden? I'll have it ready for you."

Roger looked at Mr. Peal uncertainly. He was not sure yet at what hours his employer would require him and he was anxious not to start off by creating an impression of too much independence.

Mr. Peal caught the look and its meaning and patted Roger on the shoulder in a deprecating manner which conveyed its own apology for the liberty he was presuming to take.

"Your time is mine, my dear Mr. Dibden," he said, with the air of one studying the convenience of an important client. It reminded Roger of an eastern monarch offering the half of his kingdom to a powerful magician whom it was politic to keep in with.

"If I called about half-past nine?" he suggested.

"That'll do very well," Miss Gunning said. "You know the house? But of course you don't. How should you? It's the small gray house on the further side of the Porth where the road bends. Sands Mound is the name of it."

"Ask for *me* if you have to enquire," said Mrs. Ffoulkes majestically.

"But you won't be up, Kathleen," Mrs. Gunning reminded her.

"Possibly not, Sybil, but the house is mine even when I'm in bed," said her sister firmly. "If you ask for Sands Mound, Mr. — er — Dibson, you're as likely as not to be directed to The Windy Mount which is a house nearer this way. Why Mr. Marchant chose to call his house by a name so similar to that of mine was a thing I could never under-

stand. As I warned him at the time it would be, the result is endless confusion. Mr. Marchant was a charming man but he always insisted on having his own way and refused to listen to my advice. However he's dead so I suppose I ought to let bygones be bygones."

She spoke rather as if she considered that her late neighbour had taken an unfair advantage of her in removing himself to a sphere where she was prohibited from saying too candidly what she really thought of him, and she walked out of the room with her hands folded in front of her in the attitude of one fully conscious of her superiority to the rest of humanity and as though she were already rehearsing her part in the heavenly pageant.

Mr. Peal returned from showing his visitors out with an air of the most obvious relief which he made no effort to conceal.

"Very charming but sadly lacking in intelligence," he observed to Roger as he came back into the room. "I sometimes almost doubt if Mrs. Ffoulkes knows the difference between a Maia Squinado and the Cancer Panurus."

As Roger didn't either, he preserved a discreet silence on the subject and waited anxiously for the next remark in the hopes that it might give him some clue.

He suddenly felt dispirited and profoundly conscious of his own abysmal ignorance about all the things which he supposed Mr. Peal would expect him to be up in and he had visions of being sent away at the end of a week in disgrace. His mood of exaltation had dropped off him and a cloud of depression had usurped its place, enveloping his soul in a thick mist through which no ray of hope could cast its beams. Perhaps Mr. Peal noticed something amiss for he laid his hand on Roger's arm in the apologetic way which was so characteristic of him then drew it away again quickly as though he was afraid lest he had been too presumptuous.

"I shall be very glad of your help — and of your company," he said. "I'm not a very likely companion for a

young man, I fear, but you'll have to overlook my shortcomings in that respect and try to make the best of it. I daresay you're tired after your journey and would like to be off to bed now."

"I rather think I should, Sir," Roger admitted, then, feeling he could not endure to wait for Mr. Peal to discover for himself his new secretary's disqualifications for the post, determined to make a clean breast of it and get it over.

"I'm afraid I don't know the difference between a Maia Squinado and a — the other thing you mentioned, either," he confessed despondently. I don't see what use I shall be to you. I oughtn't to have come."

Mr. Peal returned his hand to Roger's arm and this time kept it there.

"There's no need for you to know," he said reassuringly. "I didn't anticipate that you would. Only a fool would expect to gather grapes from thorns. Dear me! That sounds a little rude but it's not intended to be. What I mean *is* that I am not so unreasonable as to imagine that an inland dweller could be in a position to make a study of the habits of marine animals. I infinitely prefer to work with someone entirely ignorant than with one possessing a little knowledge, or, for that matter, with one possessing a great deal of knowledge. The former is apt to apply his little knowledge erroneously, while the latter upsets me by arguing points which I have already decided."

"But you said Mrs. Ffoulkes was sadly lacking in intelligence because *she* didn't know the difference," Roger said, only half comforted.

"Mrs. Ffoulkes has lived for certainly thirty-five years close beside the seashore with the opportunity to improve her mind if she chose to do so," said Mr. Peal severely. "She has *not* so chosen, therefore I described her in those terms. I place her in another category to you, Mr. Dibden. Shall we go to bed now? We will defer discussing working arrangements until tomorrow."

And Roger, lying in bed that night, with his window open

to let in the sound of the waves crashing on the shore a stone's throw away, his mind at ease, heaved a deep sigh of pure animal contentment at the surroundings in which he found himself and composed himself to sleep murmuring " Maia Squinado " despite the fact that he hadn't the foggiest notion what a Maia Squinado might be.

CHAPTER XIII

Roger soon fell into the routine of work, which was not of a very strenuous nature. Mr. Peal spent the mornings, and very often the afternoons, in poking about the pools in the rocks or wading out to examine the shelving sides of the cliff below the Headland while they were still wet, in pursuit of his scientific studies, and would return home with the pockets of the old shooting jacket he wore on these occasions bulging with specimens of all manner of strange crustaceans and molluscs which he proceeded to arrange in serried ranks on a deal table kept for that special purpose in his "Aquarium."

Sometimes Roger would be given pages of manuscript covered with Mr. Peal's crabbed and well-nigh indecipherable handwriting to make a typed copy of and on such occasions he ploughed miserably through a morass of technical words and phrases which, to him, were utterly meaningless, and wasted a great deal of time looking up words in a glossary and trying to reconcile them with the scratches on the paper in front of him. This was when he was left alone, but that did not happen often. Usually he accompanied his employer to the shore and, lightly clad in John's bathing suit, stood shivering at his elbow while he dislodged unwilling shell-fish from their tenacious grip on the rocks and rattled out a string of erudite Latin names, none of which Roger had ever heard before, or if he had, had forgotten.

After the first few days of warmth the weather had turned cold and wet and it was no sinecure to pass most of one's time in the water trying to show an intelligent interest in what, to a prentice hand, appeared to be a quite ordinary whelk or limpet but which, according to Mr. Peal, was a member of the highest order of the Molluscan aristocracy. Mr. Peal himself seemed to be impervious to cold or damp

and emerged from the sea at the end of an hour's research as calm and collected as if he had just been for a walk on dry land, while Roger, shaking from head to foot with cold and misery, his lips blue, his body purple, had only one thought or desire which was to tear home and plunge into a hot bath.

All the same he had never been so happy in his life before. The misery was entirely physical and he was quite willing to put up with that for the sake of the sense of freedom he experienced and for the pure joy of the surroundings in which he now found himself. The days might be gray. It might rain and blow, hail or sleet, but nothing could do away with the great violet cliffs, the swooping gulls flashing white against the slate sky, the starry masses of the sea-pinks which lodged themselves wherever a precarious foothold could be secured among the rocks and covered the Headland with a carpet that outrivaled the softest velvet pile that was ever fashioned by human fingers; the dim mysterious caverns boring their way through the hard granite into the depths of the earth or swelling out into sombre twilight chambers where the roar of the sea echoed round until it seemed as if the walls themselves were the background of a ghostly choir which, unseen by mortal eyes, sang a pæan of triumph to the accompaniment of crashing cymbals and the booming notes of the shell trumpets of a Triton orchestra outside.

There were hours when Roger could be off by himself and either walk along the sands, cool and soft beneath the pressure of his bare feet, or else, finding a sheltered nook, lie in a niche of the rock and watch the cloud-shadows on the surface of the ocean, shifting and changing as the clouds themselves shifted and changed with every passing minute. Emerald, sapphire, turquoise, topaz, amethyst: every jewel glittered and glistened each time the sun broke through until it looked as though the foundations of the Holy City had become detached and dropped from Heaven to float shorewards on the incoming tide.

Sometimes, in the early morning, before there was any-

body about, he would slip out of his warm bed and, creeping softly out of the house so as not to disturb anybody, run down to the bay which lay on the further side of the Headland and, stripping off his clothes, bathe in one of the deep pools among the rocks, then race across the intervening sands and plunge into the sea itself where he would dive through the breakers and swim out, the water lashing his naked breast and limbs, the spray smarting against his eyelids, his whole body tingling and glowing with the fierce effort of exercise. He would come back from these bathes with totally different sensations to those he was wont to experience after one of his wading expeditions with Mr. Peal. It used to seem as if his very soul had been taken out and washed and put back again; as if he had drunk at the fountain of youth or taken a draught of the elixir of life. The actual sun might not be shining at the moment, yet everything was steeped in sunshine. Later in the day he might, and probably would, inveigh against his fellow creatures who would come out from Hine and trail over the sands with hordes of noisy children whom they would admonish or encourage or ignore according to their mood and disposition; who would produce packets of sandwiches and picnic on the rocks and, when their meal was finished, would trail off again leaving in their wake the paper in which their repast had been wrapped, and ginger beer bottles and empty cigarette envelopes of a bilious yellow colour which attracted the eye towards them; but at this hour, while they were still invisible, safely hidden from view behind their bedroom curtains, he loved them all and felt tenderly towards their shortcomings, and sorry for them to be missing the top of the morning.

Most of his work with Mr. Peal was done in the evening when he would repair to the " Aquarium " with that gentleman and take down the sentences as they were dictated to him with very hazy ideas as to their inner meaning and with sundry stoppages to get the correct spelling of some new beast of which he had never hitherto heard.

Mr. Peal was extraordinarily patient with him and never lost his temper or got put out when one of these interruptions occurred, as Roger felt he himself would have done under like circumstances and, as time went on, a very real affection sprang up between the two, and gradually and almost insensibly they drifted into a position resembling that of uncle and nephew rather than that of employer and employed, though the older man always treated the younger with somewhat exaggerated courtesy and never for a single instant, either by word or deed, allowed Roger to feel that he was a mere dependent.

Mrs. Ffoulkes he saw little of, for she spent most of the time between her late uprising and her early going-to-bed sitting in an armchair in the drawing room of her small dwelling thinking out fresh symptoms with which to regale her next audience of sympathisers. She was a sort of perverted follower of the Coué system, only, instead of saying " better and better " she said " worse and worse " with frequency and great gusto until her fancies became positive facts, at which stage she reversed the process and pronounced the correct formula with such complete faith in its efficacy that it never failed to effect a cure, especially if one of those invitations to any function which was likely to " take her out of herself " came to hand, in which case the cure was a speedy one. It was a form of mental inoculation which appealed to her. She always had to be worse before she was better.

And if her sister saw through it she was too loyal to acknowledge the fact, but supported her through all her self-inflicted trials with an ardour worthy of a better cause.

If Miss Gunning could have brought herself to do such an unladylike thing as slap Mrs. Ffoulkes the instant a new symptom appeared on the horizon she would probably have saved both of them a vast amount of trouble and expense, instead of which she assiduously went out of her way to cultivate the particular maggot which her sister's brain fancied at the moment and even (when that lady's imagina-

tion boggled, as it sometimes did) supplied her with a few hitherto unthought-of symptoms to dally with. She was like a silly doting parent who, to keep her offspring quiet, gives it a box of vestas to play with and then is surprised when its pinafore is set alight.

Ever since the two had started a joint household, which happened on the demise of the late Mr. Ffoulkes thirty-two years previously, Mrs. Ffoulkes had been a sleeping partner in the firm and, while drawing all the emoluments, had left her sister to do the work. Every now and then she swooped down and asserted her rights but usually she was content to leave everything in Miss Gunning's capable hands, though she was ready enough with her criticisms. Roger often met Miss Gunning hurrying along on her way to or from the village half a mile inland where she performed the duties of minister (without portfolio) to the embarrassment of the vicar. Whenever they did meet Miss Gunning was never in too much of a hurry to stop and talk and Roger noticed that no matter what subject the conversation might begin with, it invariably got round to her nephew. It was rather touching to observe how wrapped up in John she was and how he seemed to be the loadstar of her somewhat circumscribed existence. She confided her hopes and fears about John, her reminiscences of his childish days and her proud anticipations of the glory that would be his when he reached the dizzy heights of the Episcopal bench, with a candour which Roger felt sure John would have disliked exceedingly if he could have heard her, and she obviously regarded him himself as, if not the rose, one who had been near it and inhaled its delicate perfume.

It was always a source of wonder to him that John had shown none of the signs of feminine upbringing which are so often discernible in those who have spent a solitary childhood with only middle-aged females to regulate the slippery paths of youth but he knew nothing of the sacrifices Miss Gunning had made to the end that her nephew should grow up to be manly, independent and virile.

The weary hours she had spent " bowling " until her brain reeled and her head ached; the moments of agony she had endured encouraging the boy, in a voice that quavered with terror lest he should be dashed to pieces before her eyes, to climb the topmost boughs of high trees; the heroic calm with which she had doctored wounds and bruises received in fair fight; the tears she had not shed, but which had blinded her eyes, when, at her instigation, he went off to a boarding school; all these things, and many others, were locked up in her own breast never to be revealed.

Yet now, when he was away from her, she trembled lest the wind might blow too roughly upon him and lay awake at nights wondering how he was standing the effects of the heat in London.

Mrs. Ffoulkes, though she was fond of her son, was far too engrossed in registering her own absorbing ailments to have time to waste on the potential ones of other people, and, though she professed anxiety for his health, only did so because it could be held to account for the latest symptom which was in process of development and was also convenient for the extraction of sympathy. She wielded it as a conductor wields his baton to regulate the exact volume of sound he requires from his musicians, and had only to raise it aloft to have the full chorus ready to lift their voices the minute it was dropped. She had never been able to understand, as her sister had done, the necessity for laying all this emphasis on fostering the manly spirit in her boy and would have been quite content to see him grow up a perfect lady.

She was much too lethargic to interfere, however, and resigned herself to the inevitable with no more effort than an occasional protest when John returned home from a bird's-nesting expedition with a hole in his nether garments and, once, a nervous breakdown when he presented himself before her horrified vision with a bloody nose and bunged up eye, the result of an encounter with the butcher's boy who had presumed to pass personal remarks upon Miss

Gunning's headgear and to suggest that it had been picked up on the beach.

Miss Gunning was, as far as outward appearances went, typical of her species. There was no outward and visible sign to connect her with either cricket, bird's-nesting or the noble art of self-defence, and if anybody had told Roger that she had ever forced herself, against her inclinations and from a strict sense of duty towards her nephew, to encourage these nerve-wracking pastimes, he would have laughed in his informant's face. To him she was merely a dull elderly somewhat austere spinster of advanced years and unprepossessing exterior, entirely devoid of any sporting instinct whatsoever, and with about as much understanding of boyish aspirations as a camel.

When Biddy and Miss Bellamy took up their quarters at The Windy Mount in the third week in July, Roger felt as if he had spent the greater part of his life at Porth Ros and as though Harwood, the war, and those three horrible years in London following on the war, were the events of some former existence dimly remembered.

It was the morning after their arrival that he first saw Biddy when he was hurrying homewards, blue and cold, from attending Mr. Peal at a submerged rock.

At the corner of the beach two roads led straight down on to the sands. The right hand one led to The Rise, the left hand one to a little isolated group of cottages and small houses and it was from the steps of the post office, a little white-washed building which combined the functions of the local Harrod's stores with its more official ones, that Biddy hailed him.

"Hullo, Man Friday," she called, waving a white paper bag she carried in her right hand and, at the same moment, dropping a brown paper parcel she held in her left. "Where have you sprung from?"

"Like Venus, from the sea," returned Roger. "I say. It is ripping to see you here."

He was making his way towards her as he spoke, uncom-

fortably conscious of the wet bathing suit underneath the Burberry which he wore clinging to his shivering limbs in a clammy embrace yet willing to endure it an extra five minutes for the pleasure of seeing her once more. A companion of his own age had been the one thing lacking to make his happiness in this new life of his complete and he had looked forward to Biddy's arrival with joyful anticipation. His sojourn under John's roof, brief as it had been, had whetted his appetite for comradeship and although he had only met Mrs. Rycroft on three occasions, the occasions had been very far from ordinary ones and he had a sort of feeling, which the length of his acquaintanceship with her did not warrant, that she was an old friend and he made no attempt to conceal this feeling in the tones in which he welcomed her.

"It's ripping to be here," she said, as they met half way between their respective starting points. "You'll be glad to hear that I'm fast renewing my youth in these congenial surroundings. Like Alice, I put my hand on the top of my head this morning when I woke up and said anxiously, 'Which way? Which way?', and when I got out of bed and saw the same Porth with not a grain of sand out of place I knew it was all right and that I was growing down. By tomorrow I shall probably have grown down sufficiently to shorten my skirts and let my hair hang in a pig-tail."

"Don't overdo it. You can't afford to grow down too much. It 'ud be awful if you couldn't stop and grew right down to pinafores and white socks."

Biddy eyed Roger's bare legs critically.

"You appear to have grown down beyond even white socks," she observed judicially. "What does it feel like to find yourself back in the days of extreme youth?"

"Topping," ejaculated Roger with emphasis. "Only I've had nobody to play with. Now you've come I'll go a bust and buy a spade and bucket. I bet you I'll make a sand castle that'll keep out the sea longer than yours."

"Done," said Biddy promptly. "Let's go and buy the necessary implements now."

"Well, you see, not having a pocket in my — I mean John's bathing suit I left my sixpence at home," demurred Roger.

"I think Uncle Robinson ought to have provided you with suitable playthings," remarked Biddy severely. "Anyhow, come to tea this afternoon and afterwards we'll go shopping."

"I will, if Uncle will let me," Roger said primly.

"Is he very strict with you?" enquired Biddy.

"He's a ripper," responded Roger enthusiastically. "He never takes a mean advantage of his undoubtedly superior position. He always makes me feel I must be very kind to him just because he's so terribly polite. I might be an important sort of guest — an O. B. E. or something of that kind, instead of a mere chronicler of current events in high Molluscan circles. I think I'll leave you now and get into some dry garments."

"All right. Tea at half-past four then."

"Uncle permitting."

"Bring Uncle too," invited Biddy. "Do you think he would have any objection to shrimps for tea, or would he regard such a proceeding as a studied insult to the Molluscan race?"

"My dear Mrs. Rycroft!" Roger exclaimed in mock horror. "Forgive my pointing out to you that a shrimp is a Crustacean, *not* a Mollusc."

"Oh, then it doesn't matter, does it?" Biddy said. "I love shrimps for tea when I'm at the seaside. It seems to give the necessary touch of local colour."

"You are a true artist, I can see," Roger said with a bow. "The ordinary mortal is so apt to overlook the fact that there is anything beyond the commonplace waves and rocks and sand which, to him, constitute the seaside, but you have a more chaste perception of its true inner meaning. You belong to the school of thought which can only prop-

erly enjoy Parsifal to the accompaniment of peppermints."

"Out of a crackly paper bag," put in Biddy eagerly. "Oh, Mr. Dibden! How you have gauged the hidden secrets of my soul."

Then because, for the time, they were just two children ready to see a joke in everything, they laughed at their own feeble wit as though it were full of some subtle humour, and parted.

Mr. Peal, when Roger gave him Biddy's invitation, was duly grateful but sternly refused to accept it, so Roger, after a careful toilette, upon which he expended much thought, went off alone to tea.

Barnby, looking entirely out of place in the tiny passage hall of the villa residence, admitted Roger with an air of relief. He did not altogether approve of the cramped quarters in which he now found himself and felt he was in danger of losing caste, but the sight of someone who had lately seen him in his proper sphere in town reassured him.

His relief was so great that he departed from his usual custom and unbent so far as to address the visitor.

"Very circumscribed quarters, Sir," he said apologetically. "'Ardly more than a doll's 'ouse, as one might say."

"Better than a dug-out though," Roger said.

"A dug-out, Sir, 'ardly falls under the 'eading of a 'uman 'abitation," said Barnby reprovingly.

"P'raps not, but there were times during the war when, if I'd been given the choice between a dug-out and a palace, I'd have plumped for the dug-out without a moment's hesitation," Roger said.

"Quite so, Sir, but the present need for dug-outs being 'appily a thing of the past, I'm inclined to prefer the palace when available," Barnby declared with decision. "This way, Sir."

Miss Bellamy and Biddy were in the diminutive drawing room when Roger was ushered in and the former, with due regard to the rôle assigned to her by John, gave him a friendly smile of welcome. By dint of stern self-repression

she had managed to force herself to forget that there was anything out of the ordinary in connection with the manner in which this young man and Biddy had become acquainted and she greeted him as she would have greeted any other of the numerous young men who frequented Biddy's house in London.

She was too loyal to try and ferret out what it was obvious she was not meant to know and, if she had any feeling of being shut out of Biddy's confidence, she successfully concealed it on this occasion. She had an intense dislike to mysteries, not so much because she was possessed of more than common curiosity as because they gave her a sense of restriction which prevented her from behaving quite naturally. At her previous meeting with Roger a certain awkwardness had marked the situation and awkwardness was not, as a rule, a disadvantage from which Miss Bellamy suffered and she resented it proportionately. Then, however, she had been taken more or less unawares and had had no opportunity of marshaling her forces to withstand the sudden onslaught, whereas now she was prepared and had consolidated her position accordingly.

In London, some subtle instinct had told Roger that he was being deliberately kept outside the inner circle of Miss Bellamy's favour and his manner towards her at this second meeting was inclined to be a little stiff accordingly, but he thawed directly he found that she was ready to be friendly and in less than five minutes they were chatting to one another as though there were no hidden places in Roger's past life out of which Miss Bellamy was kept.

Biddy, it must be confessed, had been guiltily conscious of her want of candour towards the one who had never wavered in her trust of her but though she might put a bold front on the matter she was, in reality, a trifle nervous as to whether a confession of the happenings of that night when she had first met Roger would be well received by her old governess.

Miss Bellamy was broad-minded enough to pass over a

good many things that would have shocked other people but, where Biddy was concerned, she would gladly have gone to the stake rather than allow the faintest breath of gossip to blow upon her ex-charge's reputation.

It was because of this idiosyncrasy on Miss Bellamy's part, of which Biddy was fully aware, that the latter had jibbed at any explanation of the circumstances connected with Roger's first appearance upon the scenes and had preferred to let it be thought that he was a protégé of John's, deluding herself into the belief that nobody was likely to entertain any other idea for a single instant and blissfully ignorant of the fact that John had, unwittingly, given her away.

It was with feelings of decided relief, therefore, that she observed her two companions on terms of comparative intimacy, considering the shortness of their acquaintanceship with one another, and realised that there was not much likelihood of any awkward questions being raised at this period. Barnby brought in the tea, including a plate of shrimps, with a faintly protesting air as though the latter delicacies were things unknown in the circles in which he moved. He evidently appeared to consider that his prestige would be lowered if it ever got about that he had lived in a family that had sunk to such depths of degradation as to admit shrimps into the drawing room.

"Poor Barnby," observed Biddy, when he had retired again and the door was shut on him. "What a blow to his susceptibilities."

"Worse than Mr. Osler's bottle of beer in bed every morning," remarked Miss Bellamy. "Barnby's last place was with a certain Mr. Osler who always drank a bottle of beer before he got up," she explained, turning to Roger. "It so outraged Barnby's sense of what was fitting that he gave notice at the end of three months."

"Barnby's a frightful stickler for etiquette," Biddy said. "He makes me feel like an unsophisticated schoolgirl when he catches me out in something of which he disapproves.

At first, when he came to me three years ago, he insisted on waiting up to let me in, if I was out at a dance or anything, although I pointed out to him that I was a widow-woman and quite capable of looking after myself. What do you think his reply was to that?"

"I haven't a notion," Roger said.

"He said very solemnly, 'Excuse me Madam, but it's looks as I go by.'"

Roger laughed boisterously.

"How did you break him of sitting up for you?" he enquired.

"I told him I didn't wish it," Biddy said with dignity. "I asked him what he thought was likely to happen to me in my own house with the door locked, but even that didn't disconcert him. He merely said, 'You might inadvertently neglect to turn the key in the lock, Madam. Ladies are prone that way.'"

"By Jove! It was a lucky thing for me that night —" began Roger impulsively, then with a sudden recollection of Miss Bellamy's presence, pulled himself up in confusion.

Instinctively both he and Biddy threw a hurried glance in that lady's direction to observe whether she had noticed the slip, but she was apparently deeply absorbed in choosing the particular lump of sugar that had taken her fancy out of the bowl and taking no interest whatever in the conversation.

All the same, the broken off sentence had not passed unnoticed and although she made a gallant effort to force her mind into another trend of thought, Miss Bellamy could not help wondering what the end of it was to be. *What* was it that was lucky for Roger? What possible connection could there be between him and Barnby having been forbidden by Biddy to sit up for her at nights? Like a flash it came to her. Roger must have been to the house at an hour when, but for Biddy's orders, Barnby would have been about. Miss Bellamy was not a suspicious woman and she would have cheerfully cut off her right hand sooner than

harbour any doubts of Biddy but, all the same, a feeling of uneasiness assailed her. She knew Biddy's proclivity for rushing in where an angel would have feared to tread and, recalling what she had already learned from John, she was able, more or less, to arrive at something very near the truth. Without being in the slightest degree narrow-minded Miss Bellamy was, nevertheless, somewhat disconcerted at her discovery. She knew her world and she could picture, in imagination, the faces of its inhabitants and hear their malicious whispers if it ever came to light that Biddy had admitted an entirely unknown young man into her house at an hour when even the staid and decorous Barnby had retired to rest. She could understand now this conspiracy of silence which had hitherto puzzled her. Even the impetuous Biddy, who, as a rule, was impervious to public opinion, had realised that in this case she must lie low and not blazon her indiscretion abroad.

If Miss Bellamy had known the true facts of the case she might perhaps have regarded the affair with greater tolerance, but having only circumstantial evidence to go upon she very naturally concluded that it had been an act of due deliberation and made no allowances for that propelling of Fate which is responsible for so many of the situations in life that are acted without the scene being set and in which the performers play their parts unrehearsed.

As so often happens when a conversation is broken up in confusion by some *mal-à-propos* remark, neither Biddy nor Roger could think of a single thing to say to cover up the blunder. To start an entirely fresh subject without any link between it and what they had previously been discussing was to emphasize the fact that a blunder had been made and yet there seemed no possible means of gliding, in a manner which would appear natural, from the opinions held by Barnby as to the irresponsibility of the female sex when entrusted with a latch key to an irrelevant topic such as the weather or the probabilities of a coal strike in the immediate future.

Therefore an awkward pause ensued during which nobody said anything.

It was Miss Bellamy who was the first to speak.

In those few brief seconds of weighty silence, during which the other two groped blindly to find an outlet, she had swiftly made up her mind.

"Don't you think you'd better tell me all about it?" she asked.

"About what?" enquired Biddy in her turn, in tones which she strove to make surprised but which she only succeeded in making apologetic.

"About 'that night,'" went on Miss Bellamy, drawing a bow at a venture. "That night when it was a lucky thing for Mr. Dibden that Barnby wasn't sitting up for you."

"You know all about it already," Biddy said accusingly. "John told you."

"John didn't tell me," said Miss Bellamy calmly.

"Who did then?" cried Biddy.

"You did yourselves, you silly children," Miss Bellamy retorted.

"I've a perfect right to invite anybody I choose into my own house at any hour of the day or night I choose," flashed out Biddy vehemently.

"Absolutely," agreed Miss Bellamy imperturbably.

"Then why are you trying to reduce a perfectly ordinary affair to the level of a second-rate melodrama?" demanded Biddy peremptorily.

"I didn't know I was," Miss Bellamy answered good-humouredly. "I only wondered where the mystery came in."

"I think you're perfectly horrid, Belle," declared Biddy, by this time not very far from tears. "I didn't tell you because — because — "

"Because you weren't quite sure how I'd take it," Miss Bellamy finished for her. "My dear child, have you ever known me to distrust you? I've no doubt the whole

affair is, as you say, a perfectly ordinary one, so why treat it as otherwise?"

"It *was* a perfectly ordinary one," reiterated Biddy. "Only with some rather extraordinary features connected with it," she added hesitatingly, looking enquiringly at Roger as she spoke.

"Mine," explained that individual as Miss Bellamy's eyes, following those of Biddy, travelled in his direction.

The terse remark did more to relieve the tension than anything else could have. Biddy, who up to this point had been inclined to feel aggrieved, rent the air with an uncontrollable squeal of amusement, while Miss Bellamy's features relaxed in a smile almost before she had time to realise it, whereat Roger guffawed loudly, and the next minute all three of them were rocking to and fro in a paroxysm of laughter quite out of proportion to the humour of the observation which occasioned it.

"We must tell her now," said Biddy, when at last she could control her voice. "Do you mind?"

"You tell her then," Roger said weakly.

So Biddy proceeded to unfold the story of that first meeting between herself and Roger and, when she had finished, drew herself up defiantly.

"So now you know," she concluded challengingly, as though to say "Criticize, if you dare," but Miss Bellamy made no attempt to do any such thing.

Instead she reached out her hand and touched Roger on the arm.

"It won't be my fault if you don't hatch out," she said cryptically, at which remark Biddy stared in amazement, but Roger, who, although uncomprehending, sensed the friendliness behind it, smiled gratefully.

"It's awfully good of you to say so," he returned, feeling that some acknowledgment was expected of him and that, under the circumstances, it was safer to generalize.

"I don't know what on earth you're talking about but I do know I'm dying for my tea so I move the closure, or

whatever they do in Parliament when they get tied up in a debate," Biddy observed.

"Carried without a division," said Roger.

CHAPTER XIV

PERHAPS it was not altogether to be wondered at that, as time went on, Biddy and Roger grew to depend on one another, more or less, for companionship. Apart from the visitors who, as the holiday season advanced, swooped down upon the district and filled every available corner, there was no one of their own age and standing with whom they could consort and it was but natural, seeing the origin of their acquaintanceship, that they should have more in common with one another than with a mere casual and temporary associate who was here today and gone tomorrow, and with whom neither of them had anything in common.

Without any definite arrangement to that effect, they drifted into the custom of going off together on Sundays (the only day that Roger could spare for such a thing) for long expeditions either along the cliffs or to some point of interest inland, starting off directly after lunch and not returning until the evening.

These Sunday expeditions were, to Roger at any rate, a sheer joy and he looked forward to them all through the week with pleasurable anticipation.

He loved the leisurely walk along the cliff top with the sheep-cropped grass redolent with the odour of thyme. He loved the golden patches of gorse, the stretches of purple heather, the streaks of white against the blue of the sky as the gulls wheeled round their heads with shrill warning cries to their mates of the approach of human beings. He revelled in the meals eaten at trestle tables in the gardens of white-washed cottages if the weather was propitious or, if not, in musty little parlours, the stuffiness of which did not prevent full justice being done to the "splits" and jam and Cornish cream, not to mention the heaped up plates of cake,

which was a course at which he never arrived because by the time he had finished the other things he had already eaten more than was good for him.

But, best of all, he loved the walk back in the cool of the evening, watching the sun setting over the sea with a golden pathway stretching from it to the shore like a fairy drawbridge.

And when the last rays disappeared and the bridge was drawn up for the night, the soft gray twilight would slowly draw its veil over the face of the sea, changing it from blue to purple and from purple to black and, overhead, the stars would come out one by one and sometimes a planet, hanging low over the water near the invisible horizon, would try to emulate the sun by throwing a feeble path of light along the surface of the sea in servile imitation of the dazzling golden one which had been there an hour before, and a little cool breeze would spring up and rustle through the garments of the two homefarers and touch the hair on their foreheads in a gentle caress, passing on with a whispered benediction until it seemed as if they two were walking alone in a world peopled by ghosts, the ghosts of all those who, long centuries since, had lived and loved and, maybe, suffered beside that changeless yet ever changing sea.

It was only on occasions, when they had been tempted by the fineness of the weather to linger unduly, that they found themselves overtaken by darkness, but when this did happen their conversation would, almost insensibly, turn to more intimate subjects. It was as though the night invited confidences which, in the glare of daylight, would have seemed too delicate to bear the weight of speech.

To nobody, hitherto, had Biddy spoken out fully of the wretched disappointment of her married life as she did to Roger under the cover of darkness. To him she talked openly and frankly of that initial mistake of hers in confounding hero-worship with love and of how she had only realised that mistake when it was too late to rectify it. It was to Roger that she confessed what, up to now, she had

shrunk from acknowledging even to herself — the relief she had felt when Colonel Rycroft died.

"It was like being let loose from prison," she said. "I tried to feel sorry, I honestly did, but I couldn't. I'd never known what it was to be free before. Until I married I was in the schoolroom and after I married — oh, you don't know what it was. I was treated like a child; at first I was spoiled, and then, as time went on and my — husband got used to me, and the glamour wore off, I was relegated to the background and controlled and supervised and suspected and cross-examined about my movements until I could have run away and hidden myself in some place where nobody could have found me. My husband consulted my wishes as little as he would have consulted the wishes of the boot-boy, perhaps not as much, for the boot-boy was in a position to give notice whereas I wasn't. He chose my friends, my amusements and my frocks and, if I went out alone, demanded a detailed account of every moment of the time I was out of his sight. I was a prisoner on parole. He lived his life, every minute of it — oh, very much lived it — but he wouldn't let me live mine. I can't think why he left me his money, but he did. Sometimes I almost wish he hadn't. You see, I know so little about business and that kind of thing. I only began to grow up four years ago. Before that I never had a chance to learn — things."

That accounted for the queer mixture of Biddy's character, Roger decided, when he heard all this. At twenty-nine (Biddy made no secret of her age) she was, in some respects, singularly innocent and unsophisticated though, as Roger remarked to himself when he gathered, from some chance word of hers, the true inward character of the late Colonel Rycroft, V. C., "Good Lord! I should have thought six years of that old swine was a liberal education for any girl."

One thing he observed with gratitude and that was that although Biddy was bitter about her matrimonial experience, she was not bitter about the world at large and accepted any pleasure that came her way, however simple,

with all the fervour of a schoolgirl, and was able to enjoy it whole-heartedly. Indeed, the more simple it was, the more she seemed to throw herself into it, though, when necessary, she could assume the air of a woman of the world without any apparent effort, and it was part of her attractiveness that one never quite knew which of the two characters she was going to be next and she changed from one into the other with a rapidity of a quick-change artiste. The confidences were not all on her side either. Roger, too, encouraged by the knowledge that his face could not be seen, found it possible to unburden his soul of some of the load which had weighed it down, and which he had never quite been able to rid himself of, during that period of despair and hopelessness when he had felt himself slowly but surely sinking lower and lower with no helping hand stretched out to save.

He told her of the horrible dread which had enveloped him like a dark cloud and dogged his footsteps like some implacable Fate — the dread lest, having sold his birthright for a mess of pottage, he should quench the last flicker of hope and be swallowed up in the darkness. He described to her, with a wealth of graphic detail, the privations he had undergone, the humiliations he had suffered, the straits to which he had been put to keep body and soul together. He drew a word picture for her of a night spent in a common lodging-house with such vividness that, for a brief second, it almost seemed as if the clean ozone-laden breeze that had travelled straight from Newfoundland over thousands of miles of ocean, was tainted with the foul stench of unclean humanity and as if, above the crashing of the waves on the shore below, could be heard the bitter curses and muttered threats of men stripped bare of the last rag of decency and self-respect, who had nothing to live for, yet feared to die, and who, if they had the chance, would pull down to their level all who had kept what they themselves had wantonly thrown away.

It was the first time Roger had ever spoken so openly

about that time. Even to John he had never enlarged upon his own feelings in the way he now did to Biddy. The darkness seemed to make the narration of them curiously impersonal. It was as though the events recorded had nothing to do with either of them individually but had happened to somebody else quite apart from themselves. And when, after these outbursts of confidences, they reached home and could see one another's faces, they would each of them feel as if the other was some stranger whom he hardly knew, and yet, at the same time, there was a bond of sympathy between them which belied that feeling and gave them a sense of security which had been lacking before.

If Miss Bellamy had any qualms about these expeditions she kept them to herself. She was far too astute a woman to risk interference. Biddy was no longer in her charge and would, quite properly, have resented any attempts on her part to dictate a line of conduct. A widow of twenty-nine cannot be treated in the same way as a young girl. She is, in the eyes of the world at any rate, her own mistress, and capable of conducting her own affairs in her own way, and if she makes a mess of them, has nobody to blame but herself. Moreover, as has been seen, Miss Bellamy had a strong objection to any direct action. She preferred to reach her objective by a circuitous route as being the safer method of getting there.

It was not that she considered there was any harm in Biddy making a habit of these excursions. Her qualms, if they existed, were based on the grounds that, when all was said and done, Roger was a new acquaintance of whom they knew very little and who had first come to light in a manner which, to say the least, was distinctly unorthodox. In London Biddy danced and rode and dined and went to theatres and music halls with a variety of young men and it was all looked upon as the natural thing to do and Miss Bellamy thought nothing of it, but then in London there was that saving clause " variety," whereas here there was no variety and therein lay the danger.

Miss Bellamy had, by craft, removed Biddy from the threatening of one peril and she had serious misgivings whether it was not a case of out of the frying pan into the fire.

She had nothing against Roger. She liked rather than disliked him, but he was *x*, an unknown quantity and, until she had worked out the problem of what "*x*" stood for, she was uneasy in her own mind, especially after a conversation she had had with Mrs. Ffoulkes, for it showed that other people besides herself had remarked on these weekly peregrinations and drawn their own conclusions which might be erroneous but which were calculated to cause mischief.

It was one afternoon when Biddy had gone into Hine to do some shopping that Mrs. Ffoulkes, who had evidently watched her out and seen her climb the cliff path leading to the town, bore down upon Miss Bellamy with an obvious air of determination to "speak out and damn the consequences" oozing from her at every pore.

Miss Bellamy, who was on the point of sallying forth to sit on the beach, unfortunately met her on the doorstep as she came out, so there was no denying her being at liberty to see her visitor, for the cushion and rug she carried gave her away.

"Won't you come in?" she asked, putting as little cordiality into her voice as was compatible with good manners. "I was just going down to the beach."

If she hoped by this means to head Mrs. Ffoulkes off she was quite mistaken.

"Thank you, I will just for a few moments, if I'm not detaining you," that lady said.

It was so palpable that she *was* detaining her that Miss Bellamy didn't think it worth while to protest to the contrary and led the way to the drawing room with anything but hospitable intent.

She did not sit down when they reached it, although she motioned her unwelcome guest to a chair, but stood by the

fireplace, the rug and cushion still under her arm, as a hint that, although hindered for the moment, she was *still* on her way to the beach.

"I'm afraid Biddy's gone to Hine," she said when Mrs. Ffoulkes had seated herself pantingly in the chair.

"My breathing's so bad," said Mrs. Ffoulkes shaking her head gloomily, and paying no attention to this piece of news, which was no news to her. "It catches me here," she continued, placing a plump hand on her chest.

"It generally does, if it catches one anywhere," returned Miss Bellamy, wondering whether Mrs. Ffoulkes had come to discuss her bad breathing or whether it was merely the prelude to something deeper even than that.

"Doctor Crowe is giving me a new medicine with paregoric in it which he hopes will relieve it," went on Mrs. Ffoulkes.

"I hope it will," said Miss Bellamy politely. "But is it wise to try and talk?"

"It's walking, not talking, that's bad for it," Mrs. Ffoulkes informed her impressively.

"How curious," said Miss Bellamy for the sake of saying something.

"It is curious, as you say," agreed Mrs. Ffoulkes ponderously. "I was a great walker in my younger days."

"Fancy," said Miss Bellamy, dropping the cushion and picking it up again in case it should have escaped Mrs. Ffoulkes' notice.

"But that was in the days of our dear Queen," Mrs. Ffoulkes remarked with an extra deep breath which Miss Bellamy supposed was intended as a sigh of regret. "Things are so different now."

Mrs. Ffoulkes was one of that race of people, now almost extinct, who believe that the world has steadily retrograded since the Victorian era came to an end. She didn't quite go to the length of declaring that "art stopped short in the cultivated court of the Empress Josephine" because she was always rather suspicious of art in any form, and French art

in particular, but she did consider that the decline of the British Empire had set in when " the hand of Queen Victoria was removed from the tiller of the Ship of State." (The words quoted are from the funeral oration preached by the then vicar in Surridge church on that historic occasion, a printed copy of which was cherished between the leaves of the Bible which lay on the table beside Mrs. Ffoulkes' bed.)

Unlike her friend, Mrs. Chaworth, the tide of war had barely wetted her feet and, in spite of the fact that John was serving as a chaplain at the front, she had never succeeded in visualising what war really did mean. She had pictured him as conducting decorous services at a safe distance from the danger zone, clad in surplice and cassock with, perhaps, a choir composed of those " dear soldiers," when other duties did not claim them, as she supposed must sometimes happen. That he ran the slightest risk never entered her head, and when, on his first leave, he tried to explain to her what No Man's Land was and she persisted in calling it Tom Tidler's ground he gave it up in despair and left her to her blissful ignorance.

So, when Mrs. Ffoulkes observed that things were so different now to what they had been in Queen Victoria's days, no hint of her real meaning entered Miss Bellamy's head, and she only thought how boring it all was, and speculated why it was that John could be so utterly unlike his mother, and had just determined, in her own mind, that the late Mr. Ffoulkes must have been an exceptionally charming man, when she was pulled up short in her reflections by the next remark.

" Who, and what is this Mr. Dibden?" enquired Mrs. Ffoulkes.

" He's a friend of your son's," answered Miss Bellamy promptly.

" Possibly," said Mrs. Ffoulkes. " But that is no answer to my question. My son, by reason of his sacred calling, has to form acquaintances —" (she uttered the word

" acquaintances " in the tones she might have employed if she were speaking of some noxious species of insect) " who are all very well in their place but whom one would hardly admit to terms of equality with oneself. I met this young man of whom we are speaking the first evening he arrived at Mr. Peal's and I am bound to confess that he struck me as being strangely at his ease for one in his position. I should have liked to see a little more reserve, a little more deference."

" You've been a long time finding it out," Miss Bellamy said bluntly.

" I reserved judgment, that is all," Mrs. Ffoulkes replied, in a judicial manner. " Did my son, may I ask, introduce this young man to Biddy?"

This was a poser for which Miss Bellamy was unprepared and while she was trying to frame a suitable rejoinder Mrs. Ffoulkes spoke again.

" He did not, I gather," she declared triumphantly. " That shows you, you see."

With an effort, Miss Bellamy collected her scattered wits.

" Biddy met Mr. Dibden first in her own house," she said with perfect truth but a guilty conscience.

"Did John bring him there?" persisted the terrible old inquisitor.

" Mr. Ffoulkes brought him to lunch," said Miss Bellamy boldly, hoping the statement was near enough the truth to escape being a lie.

She was delighted to observe that Mrs. Ffoulkes was somewhat taken aback by it, but the old lady was not so easily routed as all that, and returned to the charge with renewed vigour.

" Why?" she demanded, point blank.

" I really couldn't tell you," said Miss Bellamy, feeling that in another minute she would scream if this searching cross-examination was continued.

" My son was very attracted by Mrs. Rycroft in bygone days," observed Mrs. Ffoulkes ruminatingly. " I can't think

what reason he could have had for introducing this young man into her house."

This was so evidently a refined version of the warning "Never introduce your donah to a pal" that it instantly drove Miss Bellamy to retaliation.

"Whatever may have been the custom in the days of Queen Victoria, in *these* days a woman, especially a woman in the position of Mrs. Rycroft, is not the sole preserve of a man merely because he has once been attracted by her," she said, speaking slowly and distinctly so that the full purport of her remark should not be lost on her adversary.

Mrs. Ffoulkes flushed to an unbecoming plum colour.

"I see no necessity for vulgarity," she said, drawing herself up as far as her portly figure would allow her to do such a thing.

It was on the tip of Miss Bellamy's tongue to quote a certain proverb anent Satan and a long spoon but she had the sense to know that this would be going rather too far so she held her tongue and said nothing, although she shared the feelings of the psalmist on a similar occasion.

"You will do well to warn dear Biddy that a widow, and more particularly one who is young, rich and charming, cannot be too careful," said Mrs. Ffoulkes, mistaking Miss Bellamy's silence for a sign of capitulation and encouraged thereby to speak more plainly than she might otherwise have done.

But this was more than Miss Bellamy could put up with.

"What exactly do you mean?" she enquired with ominous calm.

"I mean that it is very unwise of her to allow this — this young man from nowhere, to monopolize her in the way he does," Mrs. Ffoulkes replied, warming up to her subject. "My maid tells me she met them returning home last Sunday at a quarter to ten, and I myself saw them start out at two o'clock, so that they had been alone together for close on eight hours."

After this ebullition on the part of Mrs. Ffoulkes, Miss

Bellamy would have died rather than admit that she too had doubts as to the wisdom of Biddy's conduct. The moment had arrived in which to carry the war into the enemy's camp.

"I wonder," she said, "whether, if Biddy had not been a young, rich and charming widow to whom your son was very attracted in bygone days, you would have thought it worth while to come here and say what you have done?"

She knew the remark was offensive but she didn't care. She was too boiling with rage to pick her words.

Mrs. Ffoulkes who, up till now, had fancied she held the field, was so taken aback by this sudden onslaught that she could think of no suitable rejoinder and sat there opening and shutting her mouth like a newly landed fish and staring at Miss Bellamy with round eyes of alarm.

"*Really!*" she said at last. She was acutely aware that, under the circumstances, the retort lacked sufficient vim to make it effective but it was the only one that came into her mind at the moment and she had to say something or choke.

Miss Bellamy, having shot her bolt, didn't appear to be inclined to follow it up. To tell the truth, she was a tiny bit ashamed of what she had said although, paradoxically enough, she wouldn't have unsaid it for worlds, even had it been in her power to do so. It was on John's account more than Mrs. Ffoulkes' that she was ashamed. She had seen a good deal of John since that day when Biddy had brought him back with her from Mrs. Chaworth's.

It had become an unwritten law that he should lunch at Biddy's on his "day off," which was Thursday, after which the three of them would drive out in the car into the country somewhere, if the weather was favourable, or, if it was not, spend the afternoon at some exhibition of pictures or other place of entertainment, not excluding the plebeian cinema for which both Biddy and John confessed a weakness, and then he would come back to tea and dinner which meant that if Biddy was dining out, which occasionally

happened, he and Miss Bellamy would sit down to a *tête-à-tête* meal over which they would discuss every variety of subject from cabbages to kings, on some of which they agreed but on most of which they disputed in friendly fashion, continuing their arguments until it was time for John to go.

Miss Bellamy had conceived a great liking for this young man with his broad views and his sane outlook on life, and more than once, since she had met Mrs. Ffoulkes, she had marvelled at the dissimilarity between mother and son. It was this dissimilarity which had driven her to the conclusion that the late Mr. Ffoulkes must have been an exceptional man to have imprinted his character on his son so indelibly that there was little or no indication of the surviving parent's personality discoverable in their joint offspring. That was the only explanation forthcoming.

And now she and Mrs. Ffoulkes were involved in a common brawl (there was no other word for it) in which John's name was bandied as a weapon of offence. That was unpardonable, and Miss Bellamy knew it to be so if Mrs. Ffoulkes did not.

"I'm sorry you thought fit to introduce your son's name into this discussion, Mrs. Ffoulkes," she said. "And sorry that I followed your example. I have a great admiration for him and I'm perfectly certain he would never have recommended Mr. Dibden to Mr. Peal unless he had been convinced of his trustworthiness and honesty."

"Trustworthiness and honesty are excellent qualities in themselves but they are not confined to one walk of life. I've no doubt Biddy's butler is trustworthy and honest but that would hardly justify her in going off on long expeditions alone with him," said Mrs. Ffoulkes, attempting to rise from her chair as she spoke, in what was intended to be a stately manner, the effect of which was somewhat marred by the lowness of her seat which necessitated a double effort on her part before she could gain a footing.

"I suppose you know that Mr. Dibden's father was a

clergyman, the same as your son," observed Miss Bellamy casually.

"There are clergymen *and* clergymen," said Mrs. Ffoulkes darkly, as she took her leave.

Miss Bellamy, from behind the window curtains, watched her down the garden path.

"*Cat,*" she remarked with fervour, as her visitor passed through the gate and was lost to sight.

The recent interview had left her considerably perturbed, more so than she cared to own. It was not that she distrusted either Biddy or Roger but she was forced unwillingly to admit that a certain amount of truth and common sense lay behind Mrs. Ffoulkes' words, offensive as those words had been.

Biddy *was* young, rich and charming. She was also a widow. These were indisputable facts which could not be gainsaid, and a young, rich and charming widow is at the mercy of any adventurer who marks her down as his legitimate prey, especially when she is, as Biddy was, of a confiding and trustful nature, and unversed in the ways of this wicked world.

Miss Bellamy was perfectly certain that up to now, Roger merely looked upon Biddy as a good comrade, but what if Biddy, in all innocence, put ideas into his mind which hitherto had not been there? The temptation, to one in his position, would be almost overwhelming.

To her fevered imagination even John, staid reliable John, seemed to have joined the ranks of those lured by the bait of gold. "My son was very attracted by Mrs. Rycroft in bygone days." Those were Mrs. Ffoulkes' actual words and they rang ominously in Miss Bellamy's ears.

The moment of panic did not last long. Her sound perspicacity soon reasserted itself and she was able to look at the question in a reasonable light.

Things were different nowadays. Platonic friendship which, before the war, had, in nine cases out of ten, proved a dismal failure, was now a recognized fact and no one,

except people of antiquated ideas like Mrs. Ffoulkes, thought twice about it. Suspicious parents no longer asked a young man his intentions if he frequented the company of one of their daughters because the chances were that he *had* no intentions of a more serious nature than those of securing her as a dancing partner, which is not to be confounded with a life partner.

Marriage, once a business, was now a pleasure, occasionally fleeting it is true, but none the less the voluntary choice of the parties chiefly concerned and not thrust upon them as a duty.

So Miss Bellamy comforted herself and, if she still, in her heart of hearts, thought Biddy was a little foolish, she kept the thought to herself and steadily refused to acknowledge it as the offspring of her brain.

When Biddy returned from Hine she was informed of Mrs. Ffoulkes' visit in a casual manner by Miss Bellamy, who mentioned nothing about the purport of it but left her to infer that it was just a friendly call.

"Tiresome old idiot," observed Biddy. "I'm jolly glad I was out. I can't think how she ever came to be John's mother. They're so absolutely different. I believe John's a changeling, except the fairies couldn't possibly have taken a fancy to Mrs. Ffoulkes' *real* child if it was anything like her. John used to be very fond of me once," she went on, dimpling. "He tried to kiss me in a dark cave."

"Perhaps he's fond of you now," suggested Miss Bellamy tentatively.

Biddy looked at her in alarm.

"Oh, not in *that* way," she said hastily.

Which went to prove that women are not, as is popularly supposed, infallible judges in such cases.

CHAPTER XV

A couple of days later two communications from Porth Ros reached John, languishing in Eddis Street.

The first was from his mother.

Mrs. Ffoulkes was one of those people who, fastening on to one particular word, introduce it into their conversation and letters on every possible occasion regardless of its proper meaning. Mrs. Ffoulkes' particular word was "apropos" and she freely interlarded her sentences with it, making it do duty to connect two otherwise perfectly irrelevant subjects; irrelevant, that is to say, to the minds of those to whom she communicated them, although no doubt in her own train of thought there was some link.

For instance, she would say, "I see in the paper today that there is some talk of another coal strike, apropos of which I met Mrs. Doon this morning and she tells her maid is leaving to be married."

This probably meant that the maid in question was leaving to be married to a coal miner, but Mrs. Ffoulkes gave no indication of the fact and left her readers or hearers to fill in the gap according to their fancy.

Her letter was the first John opened, and he skimmed through the beginning of it, which chiefly consisted of harrowing details of her latest symptoms and a full description of the medicine which had been prescribed for them, lingering lovingly over each individual ingredient of its composition and explaining at length the precise result of the treatment and the benefit she *should* derive from it but didn't expect she would.

It is to be feared that her son paid but scant attention to this part of the epistle, and it was not until he had come to the end of it and read the postcript that he took any interest "P. S. You'll be sorry to hear that my breathing

is very bad whenever I walk fast or climb a hill or am upset in any way; apropos of which your young 'friend,' Mr. Dibden, seems to be seeing a good deal of Biddy Rycroft. *Do you think she is wise to allow it?*"

The concluding sentence was heavily underlined, with a second line under the word "allow" from which John gathered that he was to infer that his young friend's conduct was not resented by Biddy as Mrs. Ffoulkes evidently considered it should be.

John read this postscript over two or three times with a puzzled frown puckering his forehead. It was obviously intended for more than a mere item of news else why should his mother lay such special stress upon it? And, if such was the case, what did it imply? There was a hint of some danger threatening which vaguely disturbed him and at last he threw the letter angrily across the table and picked up the other missive.

This was a picture postcard of the coast line stretching North from the Porth Headland and, on the reverse side of it which, after the address was filled in, had not much room left for news, was written in Biddy's sprawling handwriting, "Roger and I walked to Porth Carrick on Sunday. It was lovely. B. L. R."

There was a postscript to this also, and, like the other postscript, it provided food for thought. "We didn't get home till nearly ten," it said.

So she had arrived at the stage of calling him "Roger," had she? And she took twelve mile walks with him, did she, and didn't get home till nearly ten? John began to read between the lines of his other communication and to understand what it was his mother was hinting at. He was too dutiful a son to charge his parent directly with gossip-mongering and he would have denied it hotly if anybody had accused him of such a thing, but he wasn't very far from it when, after reading Mrs. Ffoulkes' letter again, he once more threw it down on the table and said "Damn," firmly and explicitly.

Mrs. Ottoway, whose entry into the room carrying the breakfast things coincided with this expletive, very nearly dropped the tray, as the single word fell upon her incredulous ears.

"Well, to be sure!" she ejaculated in tones which hovered uncertainly between horror and admiration; horror that a clergyman should use such violent language; admiration that he should have the courage to defy convention in such a way.

John had the grace to blush.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Ottoway," he said.

"Well, perhaps such words as them *are* best kept for church and such like, and not flung about promiscuous," she remarked. "Parsons 'ave their troubles the same as other folk, but they're expected to grin and bear 'em in silence. That's where the laity 'ave the pull. A good flare up and 'ave done with it, I say, and it must be downright maddening to sit and simmer on the 'ob when all the time you're itching to boil over. But there, I won't tell the vicar this time. It ain't worth even a penny postcard. I'll save it till 'e comes back from 'is 'oliday."

John glanced at the date of the folded newspaper which lay beside his plate.

"August 21st," he groaned. "Three weeks before I go away for *my* holiday. That brings it to September 11th."

"Well, you often get nice weather in September," said Mrs. Ottoway encouragingly. "The vicar's not 'ad it very seasonable."

"It wasn't the weather I was thinking of," John said disconsolately.

Mrs. Ottoway regarded him with a knowing look.

"Will *she* 'ave gone by then?" she enquired.

"Oh, no. She'll still be there," said John innocently, reverting to the subject that was disturbing his mind and quite forgetting that his landlady knew nothing whatever about it. "But such a lot can happen in three weeks, can't it?"

And, even as he spoke, he *knew*. Like a sudden clap of thunder the knowledge was borne in upon him that that little word "*she*" represented the zenith of his aims and aspirations, the goal of his ambitions; that life without her by his side to help and cheer him on the way would be a barren pilgrimage, a dreary march through the desert with no companion to encourage him. It was as if a bandage had been torn away from his eyes and darkness was replaced by light. It was love at first sight because, until now, he had never seen Biddy as she appeared to him in this sudden revelation. The calf-love which, twelve years ago, had seemed so wonderful a thing was, compared to this transcending passion, a rush-light set against the sun. He *knew;* and knew too, as he looked back over the last few weeks, since the time that he had met Biddy again in his godmother's drawing room, that, through all these years, the spark had still smouldered among the embers which he had thought were extinguished and had slowly but surely quickened into flame beneath what looked like a dead fire and it only needed fuel to make it break out into a blaze.

The emotion was so stupendous and overwhelming that it left John dazed and bewildered, but as he recovered his senses he was conscious of another feeling, running through the wonder like a black stain on the purity of snow — a feeling which, in its way, was as amazing as that other feeling, for it was one which hitherto he had never experienced and was so strange and unfamiliar that at first sight he didn't recognise it. He had read of jealousy in books; he had seen it as the central pivot on which plays revolved; he had met with the results of it in his daily intercourse with all sorts and conditions of men and women, and he had condemned it in his sermons as the cause of misery and wrong-doing, but it had all been second-hand knowledge. He had had no practical experience. And now, what he had so glibly and easily censured, the frailty he had castigated as a sin, had pounced upon him without a moment's warning

and was tearing him tooth and nail until the agony of it was almost more than he could bear.

"Your young friend Mr. Dibden seems to be seeing a good deal of Biddy Rycroft. Do you think she is wise to allow it?" "Roger and I walked to Porth Carrick on Sunday. It was lovely. We didn't get home till nearly ten."

The sentences hammered at his brain with maddening reiteration. He had lost all sense of proportion, all power of reasoning. The only thing that penetrated through the chaos of his mind was the fact that Roger was at Porth Ros with Biddy, walking with her, seeing her daily and, for all he knew to the contrary, hourly, and that he was here in London, miles away, out of reach of the sound of her voice, deprived of the sight of her face, sick with uncontrollable longing for her.

Then this passion passed too, and gradually his will reasserted itself and he was able to look facts squarely in the face.

These conflicting emotions following so quickly on one another's heels had, momentarily, thrown him off his balance, but common sense prevailed and he took a firm grip of himself, though it cost him an effort to do so.

It seemed to him as though an eternity had passed since he had been plunged into this welter, and glancing hurriedly at Mrs. Ottoway to see if she had noticed anything, he was relieved to find her placidly engaged in laying the breakfast and paying no attention to him. She was in the middle of a sentence, the beginning of which John had not heard and it was apparently bearing on the subject of what could happen in three weeks, so he concluded that it was in response to his last remark and that really his lapse had lasted but a few seconds.

". . . and that day week 'e took to his bed with pneumonia and in less than three weeks 'e was being carried to 'is grave," she announced with melancholy gusto.

Perhaps the banality of the remark did more to steady

John than anything else could have done; at any rate he managed to screw his face into the semblance of a smile and make some suitable rejoinder, but he was glad when Mrs. Ottoway had finished laying the table and had taken herself out of the room.

He wanted to be by himself to think over this thing which had come to him and get his bearings.

It was strange, he reflected, that it had all come about with such bewildering rapidity. He had thought that falling in love was a gradual process, beginning with a loss of appetite and ending with a discreet avowal of affection and, if the lady was agreeable, orange blossoms and white satin. On those other occasions, those interludes between his calf-love and this, when he had imagined himself to be, if not actually in love, at least hovering on the brink of that condition, he had held the reins of his feelings tightly enough to retain full control of them and prevent them from getting out of hand and it frightened him to realise that now they had got the bit between their teeth and were sweeping him along whither they would.

As the day wore on he managed to get his scattered wits into something like order and, when he had done so, to take a more reasonable view of the situation.

He douched himself with the cold comfort that he was not the Christopher Columbus of the territory of love. Others had trodden the path before and had, for the most part, survived. He refused to think of those who had fallen by the way. They were the cravens who had given up the quest in despair, and were not worth a moment's regret. Once he had arrived at a calmer state of mind he could take stock of his surroundings with a clarity of which he had been incapable at the time of his discovery.

His fit of exaltation had given way to an attitude in which stern logic kept him from falling into a too-complaisant self-assurance. He repeated to himself the French proverb which runs, *"Il y a toujours l'un qui baise et l'autre qui tend le jou."* He was ready enough to be *"l'un,"* but

the question arose whether Biddy would be willing to be "*l'autre.*" The recollection of that episode in the cavern when she had very decidedly refused to "*tender le jou*" recurred to his memory with unpleasant distinctness and he hoped it was not a portent.

As for Roger, he had lost his head about him. In these post war days it meant absolutely nothing for a girl to call a man by his Christian name at the end of the first five minutes of their acquaintance, and nobody but the veriest prude would find anything to object to in the walk to Porth Carrick even though it was extended until nearly ten at night. To build up a romance on such flimsy grounds would be merely a symptom of his disorder; it had been the fevered fantasy of delirium.

So he told himself in a spirit of bravado, nevertheless more than once during the day he got the letter from his mother and Biddy's postcard out of the drawer in which he had concealed them and re-read the two postscripts and when, his work over, he was at liberty to sit down and think consecutively, he reviewed the situation from another aspect.

Supposing, just for the sake of argument, that there *was* something underlying it all? Supposing that during these few weeks which Biddy had spent at Porth Ros her interest in Roger had developed into something deeper?

John, being an honest man, faced this possibility boldly and, while not admitting it as a probability, owned that it might be so, and, if it were, that nobody was to blame except perhaps himself for his blindness.

He sat in the darkening room, puffing savagely at his pipe, while his thoughts raced madly round in a circle, always returning to their starting point. If he had had Biddy's postcard only he would not have given the matter a second thought but, in conjunction with his mother's letter, he could not help feeling irrationally disquieted. Was it mere coincidence that he had been the recipient of those two communications from Porth Ros or was he expected to read something more into them than the words actually

written? Three weeks to go before his holiday and, as he had said to Mrs. Ottoway that morning, a lot can happen in three weeks.

With a sudden impatient movement he got up from his seat and lighting the gas went over to his writing table where he sat down and drawing a sheet of notepaper out of the case placed it on the blotter in front of him. If he couldn't see Biddy he could at least write to her and tell her of the wonderful thing which had happened to him and plead his cause.

But when he came to put pen to paper he found that the words which, in his brain, glowed and burned became lifeless and cold when they were transferred to paper and, after many attempts, during which he got no nearer to accomplishing his purpose, he gave it up in despair.

However the mere unburdening of his pent-up feelings had done him good and he retired to rest in a more quiescent frame of mind than he had thought possible earlier in the evening.

Beside his bed was a small table that held his books of devotion and at the back of it, against the wall, stood a crucifix of ebony with the figure of the Christ carved in ivory. It was here he always knelt to say his prayers and that night when, worn out with the conflicting emotions of the day, he followed his usual custom, he could almost have fancied that the head of the ivory Christ, sunk down upon the breast, raised itself for a brief second and looked into his face with eyes that held a world of tenderness and pity and understanding in their depths.

His common sense told him that the illusion was caused by the gas jet flickering in the breeze from the open window but, all the same, so startlingly realistic was it that he covered his face with his hands and, almost without being conscious of the fact that he did so, cried out, "Lord, what wouldst thou have me to do?" and immediately, as though in answer to the cry, the words, "Wait thou still upon God," stole upon his brain. The message came so spon-

taneously and without any volition of thought on his part that it really did seem to be an inspiration.

John was by no means a visionary. He was not one of those people who spend their lives looking for signs. He was just a healthy young man, healthy in mind as well as body, and as such he entered into the more innocent pursuits of his species with zest and enjoyment. He never saw why, because he was a parson, he was debarred from taking an interest in the more mundane happenings of this material world, as long as they were not calculated to hinder the steady progress of humanity towards the spiritual one. He could easily, if he had allowed himself to do so, have settled down into a state of gloom and despondency at seeing all round him the misery and want and apathy of the dwellers in the over-crowded tenements and houses in the slums which are a festering sore on the face of the greatest city in the world, but he would *not* allow himself to do so for he knew that it was only courage and determination which made it possible to carry on and that, if he lost those, he might as well give up. That was why, on those rare occasions when he got dispirited and depressed, his conscience smote him for neglect of duty, because he considered it *was* a duty to be of good cheer and keep smiling.

So when these words came to him so clearly that it was almost as if he had heard them spoken, they left an even deeper impression than possibly they might have done in the mind of one who deliberately set himself to listen and who waited for and expected some message.

"Wait thou still upon God."

That was all, but it was enough, and John got up from his knees with a feeling of quiet confidence in his heart which had certainly not been there before, and even after he had turned out the light and got into bed, the feeling still remained.

Issues were not to be forced. He and Biddy and Roger were just three tiny cogs in the vast machinery of the world

each in their appointed place and if it was decreed that he and Biddy should come together so it would be and if not . . . But that was a possibility that John was not going to look forward to. Sufficient for the day was the evil — and the good — thereof.

Biddy's happiness was the chief thing that mattered and he was prepared to immolate himself if, by so doing, he could secure that happiness for her.

And presently he slept and, through the gloom of the room, the figure of the ivory Christ, faintly illumined by the light of a lamp in the street outside which glimmered through the uncurtained window, shone out, with a face of divine love and pity turned towards him.

CHAPTER XVI

THE next morning brought a letter from John's vicar which caused him almost as much mental perturbation as the two communications he had received the previous morning, for it informed him that the writer was intending to resign his benefice in the near future, and asked permission to put John's name before the Bishop as a suitable successor to himself. He intended to stop until after Christmas, so John need not decide in a hurry but, from what the Bishop had already said, he was pretty certain that any nomination he might make would be favourably considered by that worthy, in whose gift the living was, indeed he, the vicar, had gone so far as to put forward, tentatively of course, John's name as a fitting candidate for the post and the Bishop had not turned down the proposal. If the letter had come two days ago, John would have had very little hesitation about what answer he should make. As it was, he hesitated very considerably.

The vicarage was a gloomy building in a narrow street, hemmed in on one side by a glue factory whence the smoke, and incidentally the smell, of melting bones ascended not only to heaven but also into the neighboring houses, and on the other by the parish institute, which sheltered most of the parochial activities and whence, at night, issued a confused Babel of voices from the boys' club, the scouts' headquarters, the reading-room for men (which appeared to contribute more voices than all the others put together), and the gymnasium, over which presided an ex-drill-sergeant with a bark worse than any bite could possibly be.

John tried to visualise Biddy in this setting and failed utterly. He attempted to picture her, whose drawing-room was always faintly perfumed with the illusive scent of pot-pourri, sitting in an aroma of melting bones, and somehow she didn't fit into the picture anywhere. It was like trying

to do a jig-saw puzzle with the most important piece missing. He endeavoured to imagine the face of Mrs. Pescod Dampier (who came down from West Kensington two nights a week to run a self-constituted mission which nobody wanted, but which nobody had the temerity to oppose), when she first clapped eyes on Biddy's frocks. Mrs. Pescod Dampier wore clothes because it was the custom to do so, but for all the interest she took in them she might just as well have been habited in a coat of blue woad. She boasted that she made all her own dresses, and John was inclined to believe her. She reminded him of the ladies who sit at the feet of Eros in the middle of Piccadilly Circus, and who apparently spend most of their time leisurely winding bits of bass round the stalks of whatever flower happens to be in season, save that she wasn't nearly as smart. Her hat, it might be surmised from its appearance, served the double purpose of head-covering by day and pillow by night. Her skirt dragged in the dirt behind and cocked up in front in such a way that the casual observer might be pardoned for jumping to entirely wrong conclusions, and, at the back, between it and her upper covering, there was generally a gap of two or three inches which displayed to all whom it might not concern an undergarment of gray flannel stretched tightly over her stays, the laces of which made little ridges across the surface so that John was always reminded of her when the verse occurred in the psalms, "The ploughers ploughed upon my back, they made long furrows." In cold weather the gap was concealed by what is known as a "sac-coat," a name which, in this case, was extremely apposite. His imagination boggled. It failed completely to rise to the occasion. He was left with no illusions on that score. It was Biddy and a pleasant vicarage in the country with roses nodding in at the windows and a group of elms on the lawn under the shade of which people could sit and watch the tennis, or it was the vicarage next door to the glue factory — and no Biddy; one or the other.

Which shows how very little John knew of women in general or of the sacrifices a woman will cheerfully make when she really loves.

Well, he would move in neither matter until he got down to Porth Ros and saw for himself how things stood between Roger and Biddy. Biddy should be the unconscious arbiter of his fate and the fates of a few thousand other folk also. He would ask her to marry him when he could tell her by word of mouth of this wonderful thing he had discovered, and according to what her answer was, so he would accept or refuse the vicar's request to bring his name forward as a candidate for the living.

He sat down directly he had swallowed his breakfast and answered the letter, couching his reply in non-commital terms; asking for time to think things over; frankly owning that his acceptance was contingent upon the outcome of certain private and family affairs and that, until he had settled these affairs, he was not in a position to give a more definite answer.

He took the letter out to post as soon as it was written and the envelope directed and stamped. He hardly knew why he did this for it would reach its destination no earlier than if it went off by the country post in the afternoon but an impatient desire to have it gone beyond recall possessed him and he listened to the slight thud it made, as it fell to the bottom of the pillar-box, with a satisfaction he found hard to explain even to himself.

He had set the coin spinning in the air. Would it come down heads or tails?

John's complacency, however, was to receive a rude check before the end of the day.

At half-past two that afternoon, when he had finished lunch and a pipe, he set out to pay some visits and, among others, he went to see a certain old Mrs. Hildyard.

Mrs. Hildyard had reached an age when she claimed all the credit for being still in the land of the living and seemed to think that to die was simply the result of bad

management on the part of those who did so. She implied that death was a sure proof of mental, not physical, weakness and she despised those who gave way to it from the bottom of her heart.

Her age went by leaps and bounds in the most startling fashion. Three years ago she had confessed to eighty-eight. Now, according to her reckoning, she was ninety-three and John was waiting for the not far distant time when she would put in a claim for royal recognition on the plea of being a centenarian.

She occupied a room in the house of a married grand-daughter and, although she was kindly treated and well cared for, she passed a somewhat lonely existence for her grand-daughter was the mother of a large and annually increasing family and had little time to spare for sitting down and talking, and the old lady, in spite of her boasts, was too feeble to leave her room and join the party downstairs.

A visitor therefore was a God-send, and John made a point of going to see her regularly once a fortnight, and his visits were an event in her dull life, for, since she had "got no lettering," as she expressed it, she could only while away the long hours of solitariness by looking at the pictures in the illustrated papers and ruminating over the past or, tenaciously clinging to her pet theory, planning for the future with an optimistic disregard of its probable curtailment, as far as this world was concerned, before her plans could be carried out.

John sat and gossiped with her for half an hour then rose to take his leave.

"I'll come and see you again before I go away," he said cheerfully, forgetting that he had omitted to mention the fact that he was only going for a holiday and, to his consternation, the old lady immediately dissolved in tears.

"Nobody never told me you was going to leave us, Sir," wailed she disconsolately. "What'll I do when you've gone? There'll be nobody to come and see me then."

"But I'm only going for a holiday, Mrs. Hildyard," explained John. "I shall be back again in three weeks." But the old lady would have none of it.

"You ain't coming back again, I know. Them 'eathen 'ave got 'old of you. I know they 'ave."

"*Them what?*" enquired John, in his agitation disregarding grammar.

"Them 'eathen 'oo proper get the Gospel," sobbed Mrs. Hildyard in an abandonment of grief. "They've proper got you right enough. Em was telling me about the meeting they 'eld last week, and 'ow they was 'ollering out for new blood, which well they may do, being cannibals."

"Em" was Mrs. Hildyard's grand-daughter and John could only suppose that she had been at a meeting which had been held the previous week on behalf of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel and had been giving her relative a not too lucid report of the proceedings which had left her with a totally wrong impression of their aims and objects.

The poor old thing was so thoroughly convinced that she had hit upon the truth that it took John quite a long while to calm her, but he was able to do so at length.

"You promise me you're coming back," she said, holding out a pair of trembling old hands towards him.

"I promise you, Mrs. Hildyard," he assured her.

"For good," she persisted.

John hesitated. In the present uncertain state of his affairs he felt he could not give her any definite assurance on this point.

"I shan't always be here, you know, Mrs. Hildyard," he said at last. "I — I might want to — to better myself one of these days," he concluded with a rush, using the only language he knew she would understand. To tell her "he might get preferment" was no better than speaking to her in a foreign tongue.

If he had thought to pacify the old lady by this guarded reply he was greatly mistaken. She merely saw in it a con-

firmation of her original fears and started to weep again with renewed vigour.

"You ain't coming back again," she reiterated. "I shan't want to live when you're gone. There won't be nothing to live for. They all go, all as I care for. I've neither chick nor child left. Seven I bore and I've buried 'em every one, except my boy George as went for a sailor, and 'e was drownded at sea so I couldn't bury 'im 'owever much I might want."

"You've got your grand-daughter, Mrs. Hildyard," John reminded her.

"Oh," Mrs. Hildyard said, in tones of the deepest contempt. "Yus, I've got *'er* for what she's worth."

And John made his escape while she was too much engrossed in the defects of her grand-daughter's character to notice his departure. He tried to derive some amusement from the recent conversation but it was a half-hearted attempt for his conscience was twitting him rather badly.

Once, in France, he had been present at a court-martial. The prisoner being a young officer, hardly more than a boy, who, when the battalion had been suddenly ordered to move up to the front, had been missing. It had transpired in the course of the evidence, that he had gone off, without leave, to the town four miles away from the rest-billets, and, when he should have been marching up with his platoon to the trenches, was with a woman who eventually was proved to be a German spy and whose mission it was to lure silly young idiots like this one to besmirch not only their morals but their honour.

The incident came into John's mind as he walked homewards. He saw again the boy's white strained face as the damning evidence piled itself up. He saw the lips with the blood upon them where the lad had bitten them in his agony of mind. He saw the shaking hand wiping the heavy beads of perspiration from the forehead, and he heard once again the sharp cry of "Mother," that rang through the room when the verdict was given; the appeal

for help to the one who never, in all his young life, failed him, and who was in far-away England knowing nothing of her boy's Gethsemane.

"He turned his back on duty for a woman's kisses," whispered the voice of conscience in John's ear.

"She was a vile woman. Her kisses were bought ones," John answered his tormenter angrily. "How dare you compare her with Biddy?"

"She was a woman," chuckled conscience, "and I never mentioned Biddy's name."

"You were thinking of her."

"I plead guilty."

"Besides, the cases are not parallel. The boy was selling his fellow creatures' lives."

"And haven't fellow creatures souls? Is it worse to sell their bodies than their souls?"

Of course if John hadn't by this time worked himself into a thoroughly morbid state of mind he would have seen the absurdity of the comparison, but Mrs. Hildyard had set it busily working in a new direction and it needed adjustment before it could get into its proper stride.

It seemed so impossible a thing to expect that Biddy would ever consent to leave her luxurious life and come and take up her abode in the gloomy vicarage next door to the glue factory that that solution of the question never even occurred to him.

His conversation with Mrs. Hildyard had moved him more profoundly than he cared to acknowledge. He was too honest to try and pretend he was not popular among the people with whom he came in daily contact. He knew they liked him. He knew it from the way they came to him with all their difficulties and troubles, little as well as big. They did not confine their confidences to religious questions either. Domestic, legal and medical advice was sought from him, the latter often of a most embarrassing nature, and if it was not always taken, the compliment was none the less sincere.

He knew they liked him, but until this afternoon he had not realised fully what his going away would mean to some of them, and the realisation of it stirred him to his depths. How could he even think of deserting them? He felt it would be like a captain deserting his ship. The message that had come to him last night so clearly and unmistakably came once again.

"Wait thou still upon God."

And once again that blessed peace descended upon him and lapped his soul like a river of water in a thirsty land.

It was not for him to force the hand of God. In time the answer to that cry of his, "Lord, what wouldst thou have me to do?" would be vouchsafed and until that time he must be content to wait.

. . . . . .

The vicar returned from his holiday on September the 9th, which was a Saturday, and on the Monday following John went away. There wasn't much opportunity of discussing the subject of his letter in the short interval. Sunday was a day when time was at a premium, and though John, as was usual, had supper at the vicarage, both the junior curate and the vicar's wife, not to mention his son and two daughters, were present and prevented any private conversation. However, the vicar did find a moment in which to speak alone to his subordinate and ask him if he had come to any decision.

"If you don't mind, I'd rather let it stand over until I come back," John said nervously. "You see there are my — my people to think of before I can come to any final decision."

The vicar, a kindly little man with very definite ideas on what he was pleased to call "the sanctity of home ties," beamed at John approvingly through his glasses.

"You wish to consult your mother," he said. "Very right and proper, my dear Ffoulkes. A boy's best friend, eh?"

John let it go at that. He couldn't very well explain to the

vicar that the reason for the delay in giving an answer rested, not with his mother, but with somebody quite different.

Before, when John had started off for his holiday, he had done so with the blessed assurance that he was going to thoroughly enjoy himself among the old familiar haunts. This time he was more than a little dubious. In one direction or another the whole course of his life was to be altered by what the next few days brought forth and he felt restless and unsettled.

With a tremendous effort of will he had managed to prevent himself from dwelling on the future during the three weeks that had elapsed between that morning when he had hit upon that wonderful discovery that he was in love with Biddy and his leaving London, but now that he was actually upon the journey he found it impossible to keep his mind off the subject.

Each revolution of the wheels of the train in which he travelled was bringing him nearer to the moment of decision, to the moment when it would be shown him what he was to do, and he had to summon all his stock of courage to his aid to go forward and meet it. The train steamed into Hine station and drew up slowly, and John put his head out of the window.

He had seen a little group composed of his aunt, Biddy and Roger, as his carriage slid up the platform and he looked over the heads of the people crowding out of the other compartments to see if he could attract their attention.

It was Biddy who saw him first and waved a brown paw. John returned the salutation and the next minute the three who had come to meet him had pushed their way through the throng and were greeting him each in their own particular manner.

His aunt kissed him on the cheek almost shyly. She was not used to public demonstrations of affection and she felt awkward and constrained in the presence of the other two. If she had given way to the deeper emotions which

welled up in her heart at the sight of him, she would, regardless of who might be standing by, have thrown her arms round his neck and embraced him warmly, but effusiveness was foreign to her nature and she could not summon it to her aid at will. She would have given worlds to be able to express her pleasure at seeing him again by some show of affection, some special proof of her contentment at his return after his long absence, but that absurd feeling of shyness, that dread of a public display of sentiment, held her back.

Biddy suffered from no such scruples. She announced her delight at his arrival in unmeasured terms and in a voice which she made no attempt to lower. The other people on the platform were just so many nonentities who didn't matter two straws. She took them as little into account as she would have taken into account a group of wax figures.

"I'd love to kiss you, too," she observed in clear tones. "I suppose it wouldn't do though. Somebody might sneak to your bishop and then there'd be trouble. Bishops are so fussy and particular, aren't they? It is ripping to see you though. It does seem a pity not to mark the occasion. Isn't it ripping, Man Friday?"

"I should jolly well think it was," said Roger, gripping John by the hand. "How are you?"

"Oh, I'm all right. No need to ask how *you* are," returned John, and indeed there was not.

The two months had worked wonders in Roger. His face was tanned to a deep olive-brown, his eyes were bright and sparkling, and the hair rippling back from his forehead seemed to have borrowed some of the sunlight for there were little flecks of gold among the dark of it. And besides all this, there was an air of being master of his own soul which had been lacking before. There was an atmosphere of youthful virility about him which was extraordinarily attractive, quite apart from his features which, without being too regular, were sufficiently good to make him well worth looking at. The spasm of jealousy which had gripped

John when he had had that letter from his mother had been only a transitory one which had long since died a natural death. He was too loyal and true hearted himself to harbour doubt and distrust for long, especially against one to whom he had already given such proofs of confidence and trust. His simple creed was that if you trusted a man at all, you must do it thoroughly and completely.

So it was not difficult for him to forget that he had ever had that hour of madness and to meet Roger as though it had never been, and indeed as he felt the warm clasp of his hand and saw the unaffected pleasure in his honest eyes and heard the note of welcome in his voice, he recognised that the incident had not diminished one whit his very real affection for the boy he had befriended so wholeheartedly. It was just a phase he had passed through and it was over and done with, never to return, whatever might befall.

It was Roger who proposed that John should walk home with him and Biddy by the cliff path, leaving Miss Gunning to drive round with the luggage, but when his aunt said quietly, "Your mother is waiting for you, John," he abandoned the project and went in the fly without a word of protest, and watched the other two set out alone together as though he didn't mind a bit, although he was longing to join them.

Perhaps he was a tiny bit disappointed that they acquiesced in the arrangement so calmly and didn't attempt to dispute his decision, but, if so, he was careful not to allow it to appear in his manner, but waved his hand in a friendly fashion which successfully concealed his inner feelings when the carriage presently passed them on the road.

"I hope you like Roger, Aunt Sibyl," John said when they had left them behind.

Miss Gunning hesitated the fraction of a second before she replied.

"Yes, I do like him," she said, then, with apparent incon-

sequence, added, "But I wish Biddy wasn't quite so well off."

"Why?" enquired John, though he knew perfectly well what she was driving at.

Miss Gunning, for some inexplicable reason, had a child-like faith in her sister's judgment and dutifully followed her lead and echoed her opinions in all matters except those in which her nephew was concerned. In those she refused to be coerced and it was because Roger was a friend of John's, or at any rate a protégé of his, that she hesitated. John evidently liked Mr. Dibden; Mrs. Ffoulkes quite as evidently disliked him, and she hadn't quite made up her mind whose view to adopt with regard to him.

So when John asked why she wished Biddy wasn't quite so well off in that peremptory manner, she was a little nonplussed to know how to answer him.

"It's a great temptation to a young man in his position," she said at length.

"What d'you mean?"

Poor Miss Gunning began to wish she had let John walk. She didn't altogether appreciate this cross-examination, and regretted she had introduced Biddy's name into the conversation.

"Mr. Dibden sees a good deal of Biddy," she said deprecatingly.

"D'you mean you think he's after her for her money?" demanded John pointblank.

"No, oh no, I wouldn't go so far as to say that," his aunt replied hurriedly, painfully aware that she *had* gone too far already and making a desperate effort to retrace her steps.

"But you must mean something," persisted John.

Miss Gunning, who, by this time, was reduced to such a pitch of nervousness that she didn't quite know what she *did* mean, fluttered uneasily and, clinging despairingly to the maxim that silence is golden, said nothing. If she had been one of the crying sort she would, at this juncture, have

burst into tears, so bitterly disappointed was she that the first half hour of John's arrival, a time she had been looking forward to and planning for for weeks past, should be spoiled for her, and she wished with all her heart that she had kept her mouth shut and had not made that uncalled for remark about Biddy.

She was thankful that John didn't insist on her explaining what she meant for she would have been hard put to it to satisfy him, and she would have scorned to shift the blame on to his mother's shoulders which was the only way she could have got out of it.

"Naturally Roger sees a good deal of Biddy," he said, as Miss Gunning remained silent. "He owes her a lot."

And then, to her relief, the subject was dropped and, for the remainder of the drive, they discoursed on ordinary topics and no further reference was made to either Biddy or Roger.

CHAPTER XVII

"How brown your neck is. I can't imagine why, considering it's rained steadily every day for the past week," observed Biddy, regarding Roger with a critical eye.

It was nine days after John's arrival and the three of them had taken advantage of a sudden burst of warm sunny weather, following on a wet cold day, to go along the sands at low tide in the direction of Ferrier Bay and settle themselves in the rocks in a spot where the tripper was not likely to intrude upon them. Roger was there because Mr. Peal, that most considerate of masters, had dispensed with his services for the morning.

Biddy was seated on a boulder with Roger stretched on the sand at her feet, lying flat on his back with his hands clasped under his head, while John, a couple of yards away, had propped a sketching block against a flat bit of rock with a convenient ledge underneath and was endeavouring, very unsuccessfully, to transfer to paper the scene which spread before their eyes.

The two men were wearing shorts and Roger had discarded the sweater he had started out in, and the sleeves of his white flannel shirt were rolled up above the elbows and the shirt itself open at the neck showing the upper part of a chest burnt brown with exposure to the wind and sun.

He sat up at Biddy's remark.

"I hope you aren't suggesting that the colour of my neck is due to any other than perfectly natural causes," he said severely.

"What d'you mean?" asked Biddy.

"You seem to be inferring that the rain ought to have removed the brown, which implies that you imagined it to be superficial and not indigenous to the soil," Roger complained.

"Like the Irish factor's daughter," put in John, retiring a few steps from the work of art upon which he was engaged in order to reassure himself that it was recognisable as a seascape and not liable to be mistaken for the picture of a ploughed field.

"Who's she?" enquired Roger. "Tell us about her.

"Never mind your rotten old sketch," Biddy said. "It's like nothing on earth anyhow."

"Of course it isn't, because it's meant to be the sea," John remarked indignantly.

"Glad you put in the 'meant'" Roger observed lazily. "Chuck it into its native element and come and sit down and tell us about the factor's daughter. What is a factor, by the way?"

"Something in a sum," said Biddy with an air of superiority. "Fancy your not knowing that, and you last from school, too."

"Do pull yourself together and use what little common sense you have been endowed with," Roger said. "How *could* something in a sum have a daughter?"

"'Sh," ordered Biddy, lifting an admonishing forefinger. "Come and sit down, John, and begin. Now," as John threw himself on the sand at Roger's side. "The story of the factor's daughter. It sounds like the Arabian Nights, doesn't it?"

"'Sh, yourself," said Roger. "Fire away, Padre."

"The story of the factor's daughter," began John impressively.

"Hurrah," said Biddy, clapping her hands.

"*Will* you 'ush and let the gentleman begin," remarked Roger, jerking her skirt.

"Once upon a time there was a factor who had two beautiful daughters," John said, "and they were invited to a party at the house of a lord, so they ordered new dresses as it was a special occasion. I ought to tell that it was in Ireland that all this happened."

"All what?" asked Biddy. "That's not the end, is it?"

"No. It's right at the beginning. Well, the night of the party came, and the lord and his lady were receiving their guests in the big hall, and the band was playing and the people had started to dance, but the two beautiful daughters of the factor—"

"I *do* wish I knew what a factor was," interpolated Biddy.

"The two beautiful daughters of the factor were absent. And the lord said to his lady, 'How is it that the Miss Murphys have not come to our party when they accepted?'"

"Was Murphy their name?" asked Biddy interestedly.

"Even so," John told her. "And his lady said 'I haven't an idea,' and just at that moment the butler—"

"What was *his* name?" enquired Biddy.

"The butler," continued John, ignoring the question, "flung open the door and bawled out 'Miss Murphy and Miss Moira Murphy.' 'You're late,' snapped the lord, who was rather irascible. 'Oh, my lord, oh, my lady,' said Miss Murphy. 'Pray forgive us, but the fact is that the dressmaker only sent home our new gowns just in time for us to get into them and when sister came to put hers on, it was cut square and she'd only washed for a V.'"

"But as far as I can make out. I'm suspected of not having even gone to the length of washing for a V," grumbled Roger. "I don't like that story."

"Well, you can take it or leave it," John said affably.

"Then I'll leave it, thank you," returned Roger promptly. "Come and bathe, Padre, and I'll prove to you what a cruel aspersion has been cast upon my character."

"Can't," said John. "I haven't brought my bathing suit along, and anyway, the tide's too far out. I don't like it when it's as low as this. There are beastly cross-currents. I shouldn't recommend you to go in now."

"Bosh!" Roger said contemptuously. "I've often been in when the tide's been quite as low as it is at the present moment. I'm going anyhow."

"I shouldn't. Honestly I shouldn't," said John earnestly. "It's a mug's game to go running risks."

"My dear old Jeremiah, I'm not *going* to run any risks," declared Roger. "As Teddy Payne, wasn't it, used to say, I'm very fond of you but I'm passionately in love with myself. I didn't lug a bathing suit and a great heavy towel all the way here for the pleasure of carrying them home again."

"Roger! Don't be an ass," Biddy said anxiously. "It's not good enough."

"My dear Biddy, it's as safe as houses," Roger said obstinately. "I'll be darned careful, I give you my word I will."

Biddy shrugged her shoulders.

"Talk about wilful woman!" she exclaimed. "A wilful woman's left at the post when she's matched against a pig-headed man."

"Well, good-bye, if you never see me again," Roger said flippantly, gathering up his bathing suit and towel and throwing them over his arm.

"Oh, I wish you wouldn't talk like that," Biddy said passionately, but Roger was already sauntering away to find a convenient rock behind which to undress and, if he heard her appeal, paid no heed to it.

"Is it really dangerous, John?" she asked as Roger disappeared from view. There was a little nervous tremour in her voice which did not escape his notice, and he looked up at her curiously.

"I shouldn't get the wind up, Biddy, if I were you," he said, smiling reassuringly at her. "I don't know what Roger's like as a swimmer, but I expect he knows what he's capable of. Besides, it may be perfectly all right. The currents vary tremendously. One can never be sure about them. There may be practically none at all today."

"Oh, but I wish he wouldn't," Biddy said disconsolately. "I wish he wasn't so — so *damned* obstinate. I'm sorry, John, but I simply must use bad language. Why didn't

we *urge* him to bathe, then he'd probably have refused to. I don't think I can bear to watch him. I'll go home. No I won't. I couldn't bear *not* to watch him."

John picked up a stone lying on the sand beside him and flung it aimlessly seawards.

"Would you be nervous if it were I that was going to bathe and not Roger?" he said reflectively.

His back was toward Biddy so he didn't see the hasty glance she threw in his direction before she replied.

"Of course I'd be nervous, John. I'd simply hate it, only — " she broke off and began to scrabble in the sand with the point of her parasol.

"Only what?" asked John encouragingly.

"Well, you're — different somehow."

"How do you mean, different?"

"You're not stubborn. I should feel, if you were being perverse, as Roger is now, that it wasn't just desire to assert your independence that was at the bottom of your perversity but that you had some sound reason for acting as you did."

John swung round so that he no longer sat with his back to Biddy but at right angles to her so that he could see her face. She wasn't looking at him but at the tip of her parasol, but he knew she couldn't fail to notice his altered position out of the corner of her eye.

"All the same," he said, "in your heart of hearts you admire his stubbornness. Oh yes you do," as Biddy would have protested. "You women are all alike. You think obstinacy in a man is a sign of strength, and perversity a mark of will power. Roger's a stiff-necked individual."

"I thought you — liked Roger," she said in a low voice.

"So I do," John said whole-heartedly. "I do more than just like him. I'm awfully fond of him, but that doesn't prevent my seeing his faults and what you rightly describe as his 'damned obstinacy,' is not the least of them. If it is not cured soon he'll be up against it all his life and a thing like that doesn't stand still. It grows with age and, in

time, developes into a callous disregard of the feelings and wishes of everybody but oneself. It forms a hard crust over the heart which it would take a sledge hammer to break. It's just because I'm fond of Roger that I want to smash that stubbornness of his which he calls self-respect and you, probably, strength of character."

"I think you're very unjust," Biddy said tremulously. "It was nothing but his stubbornness, his refusal to give in, which helped Roger to win through."

"There you are, you see. You're holding it up as a virtue now. What did I tell you?"

"Well, isn't it?" demanded Biddy fiercely.

"In moderation perhaps, yes. But an exaggerated virtue can assume the attributes of a vice, you know," John said. "You're a little inconsistent, Biddy, for just now you were leading me to infer that it was a virtue in me that I was *not* stubborn. Or was I mistaken and did you really mean a vice?"

"Oh don't badger me, John," Biddy said imploringly. "I'm simply terrified of Roger bathing in case anything happens. You frightened me saying that about the currents at low tide."

John regarded her searchingly for a few seconds. Why should she be so terrified at Roger's extremely problematical danger? It wasn't like Biddy to show signs of nerves.

"Biddy," he said at length, "I've been your pal for twelve years even if we did lose sight of one another. You've known Roger four months. Supposing — I'm only supposing mind — that you had to choose one and only one of us as a — a friend, which one would it be?"

Biddy looked at him with startled eyes.

"But that's a ridiculous question, John," she said, her breath coming quickly as though she had been running. "I've not got to choose."

"All right, dear," John said, patting the hand which lay clenched upon her lap. "I was only supposing, you know. Of course it was a ridiculous question."

He got up as he spoke, and walked away from her with a laugh that did not ring altogether true.

"I'll go and see what Roger's up to," he added.

"John. Come here. I want to talk to you."

He turned obediently and retraced the few steps he had taken and, when he reached Biddy's side, stood there with a queer little smile upon his face waiting for her to speak.

"John," she said, after a slight pause, "what did you mean exactly when you asked me just now which I would choose as a friend if I had to choose between you and Roger?"

"Oh, I don't know," he said wearily. "I was just being — foolish, I suppose, that was all."

Biddy shook her head.

"I don't think it was quite a fair question, John," she said gently but with a hint of reproach in her voice. "How can I answer it and yet, if I don't you'll go imagining things that — perhaps don't exist."

"You're right," he said forcing his words out with an effort. "It wasn't a fair question and there's no need to answer it."

There was no need because she had answered it already though she was unconscious that she had done so.

She sat there looking at John with eyes that held a mute appeal in them to probe no deeper lest he should guess her secret, that pitiful little secret that she had locked up in her breast, and which she herself had, as yet, only half acknowledged. She could not affirm yet her pride forbade her to deny it entirely. She did not attempt to deceive herself as to the purport of the question that had been put to her. It was not mere idle curiosity that had prompted it. There was more behind it than that. It would never have been put unless John had suspected something and, if that were so, how badly she must have guarded her secret. Her cheeks dyed crimson at the thought and, without knowing that she did so, she covered them with the palms of her hands to try to hide the tell-tale blush.

If John needed any confirmation of his suspicions Biddy supplied it in that natural impulse and he turned his head away lest it should seem that he was spying on her.

"I'll go and find Roger," he said dully. "I expect he's bathing the other side of George's Island."

George's Island was the name given locally to a couple of huge rocks which stood out on the shore about twenty yards from one another. At low tide they were accessible but when the sea was up they were surrounded by water. So tall were they that the tops of them were green with grass and great patches of campion found a foothold there. Who or what the "George" was who gave them their name was lost in the mazes of antiquity. Probably he was some old smuggler who used them as his stronghold and lit on their summits the bonfires which would allure ships to their doom.

It was round the right-hand one of these that Roger had disappeared and John followed in the same direction, compelling himself to stroll quietly along, hands in pockets, so as, if possible, to hide from Biddy the tumult raging in his breast.

She watched him go with an expression in which bewilderment, pity, and a scarcely defined fear struggled for mastery.

That sudden, unexpected question had caught her unawares. She knew she had hurt him and was hurt herself in the knowledge. What she did not know as she watched him move slowly away with that palpably assumed air of unconcern was that, all unconsciously, she had, in those brief minutes, altered the course not only of one man's life but also of the lives of several hundreds of men and women in the crowded slums of the East End, whom she had never seen and about whom she neither knew nor cared.

Round the corner of George's Island John came upon Roger, naked and unashamed, sheltered behind a rampart of rocks busily engaged in drying himself. It was evident that he had had his bathe and returned from it in safety.

"You were a mug not to come," he called out with a cheerful grin, as John approached. "It was simply glorious."

John seated himself on a convenient boulder and pulling out his pipe filled and lit it. No one, to look at him, would have guessed that he had just passed through a crisis in his life; that, in the last five minutes, he had been pulled up sharply and turned aside from the pleasant path in which his feet were set, into a narrow way paved with jagged stones that cut and bruised his feet and in which there was no room for two to walk abreast so that, perforce, he must journey alone.

"You frightened Biddy," he said.

"I didn't frighten her. It was you," Roger retorted in muffled tones from the depths of the shirt he was pulling over his head. "Talking all that piffle about currents and running risks! There wasn't the vestige of a current and as for running risks, why, good heavens! One runs more risks in one's bath every morning. You're sitting on my shorts if you don't mind. Thanks," as John threw the articles in question at him.

When he had completed his toilette he came and sat down by John's side and slipped an arm through his.

"I say, John — You don't mind my calling you John, do you? It sounds more like the continuance of brotherly love," he went on with a little half-shy laugh. "It was a bit of luck for me that Biddy passed me on to you."

"Why?" asked John.

He wondered what on earth had made him seek companionship just at the very moment when he most wanted to be alone and think things over and, moreover, the companionship of the man whom he might be expected to feel least disposed to meet at this time. He was vaguely surprised that there was not a recurrence of that burst of insane jealousy which had swept over him on the receipt of that letter from his mother. Envy there was, it is true, but it was the envy that an old person feels for a young one

or an invalid for one in robust health. Neither hatred, malice nor any uncharitableness had part in its composition. Since he had come into personal contact with Roger once more he had realised again that curious magnetism which the latter possessed for him and which had attracted him so strongly when he had first met him in London.

There was something disarming about Roger which put him outside the pale of criticism. The rough usage he had received at the hands of his fellow men, their neglect, their suspicion, their hardness, had not made him, in his turn, either neglectful, suspicious or hard. He was like Biddy in that respect. He never nursed resentment against the world at large because certain members of it had wronged him. He had emerged unscathed from the fiery furnace and there was not even the smell of burning as a reminder of the ordeal through which he had passed.

So John, because he was too generous to do otherwise, did not steel his heart against his unconscious rival but deliberately yielded himself up to the power of the spell which Roger cast round him.

"Why was it a bit of luck for you that Biddy passed you on to me?" he asked again.

Roger removed his arm from inside John's and put it instead round the other's neck.

"You blessed old simpleton," he said affectionately. "Don't be so confoundedly unassuming. Biddy could never have done for me what you have. Wasn't it you who got me my job with my present boss? Wasn't it you who took me, a stranger, in, and fed and clothed me? Wasn't it you who made a man of me again, who gave me back my self-respect? You know it was. I owe Biddy an eternal debt of gratitude for it, because it made it possible for me to accept things that otherwise I could never have accepted."

"Why couldn't you?"

"Oh, I don't know. A man can take things from a man that he couldn't from a woman."

"One can't lay down a hard and fast rule about a thing of that sort," John said with conviction. "We thrashed the matter out once before, if you remember."

"I remember you trotted out a lot of antediluvian arguments about woman having been created as a helpmeet for man but, as far as I can recollect, they weren't very convincing. The manners and customs of the Garden of Eden would hardly conform to the usages of modern society. Hadn't we better go and find Biddy and get her to identify my corpse?"

Roger withdrew his arm from John's neck and lowered himself off the rock on which he was sitting.

"Come on, I'll race you," he said.

John got up slowly.

"It wouldn't be a fair race," he said. "I carry eight years more than you."

"I'll give you a start then," Roger said condescendingly.

"I can't win even with a start," John said, with a shade of bitterness in his voice.

"You don't know till you try," urged Roger.

"I have tried," John said with finality.

Any further argument was put an end to by Biddy's appearance upon the scene.

"Hello," Roger shouted. "Come to help John do first aid?"

"You're a beast, Roger," Biddy said trenchantly. "Here have I been fretting myself to fiddle-strings imagining that John was all this time vainly attempting to rescue you from a watery grave and you've been calmly gossiping behind a rock."

"I've also been dressing behind a rock," Roger informed her. "It's a most frightfully risky thing to shoot suddenly round a corner in these parts without sounding the 'take cover.' Five minutes earlier and you'd have found me covered with nothing but confusion!"

"And from what I know of you *that* wouldn't have gone far," observed Biddy. "You aren't what I should call over-

dressed now. Hadn't you better put on your sweater? You'll catch cold."

"Thanks for the tip — helpmeet," Roger said with a sideways grin at John.

"Don't call me names," said Biddy severely.

"There you are, you see," Roger told John triumphantly. "It went out with the flood. Who was right, you or I?"

John was already walking away to where Biddy stood waiting for them so he didn't notice how Roger, as he stopped behind to collect his bathing things, dropped his air of laughing gaiety directly his back was turned, as if it were a relief to get rid of the necessity for make-believe for a few moments.

Had he been conscious of the sudden change of demeanour he must have wondered what had become of the light-hearted youth who had joked and trifled so carelessly just now, for his place was taken by somebody quite different, somebody who looked out across the sparkling sea with eyes that held little in them of either laughter or gaiety.

He would have found food for thought too in the effort Roger made, as he followed in his wake, to throw off his abstraction and assume again the mask of abandon with which he concealed his real feelings. On the homeward way it was Roger who kept the ball of conversation rolling. The other two were somewhat silent for each of them was uncomfortably mindful of the little scene which had taken place earlier, and each was afraid of appearing to allude to it in any way however distantly. It was as if a shadow had interposed itself between them. Biddy was wondering to what extent John had noticed her evasion of the question he had put to her while John was too intent on reconstructing his future to have much inclination for talking. His world was lying shattered at his feet and all he could do now was to try to prevent Biddy from finding out that she was the one who had wrought the mischief.

He was thankful when the walk back came to an end and he could be alone; and when Biddy tentatively suggested his

joining her for tea on the rocks that afternoon, he excused himself on the plea of having some writing to do, and she did not press the point.

After lunch and an hour for what Miss Bellamy called "silent meditation," the two ladies sallied forth with cushions and work and a tea basket and made their way to a broad ledge of rock running parallel to the Porth projecting from the side of the Headland. A flight of stone steps led down to this from the top and, at the seaward end of the ledge, a further flight of steps cut in the solid rock enabled any one who wished to do so to reach a sort of platform of granite six feet or so above the level of the sands so that, when the tide was up and the sands covered with water, the granite platform formed a kind of breakwater on which to sit and watch the waves rolling in.

"I'll join you presently," Miss Bellamy said, when they arrived at the top of the upper flight of steps. "I'm going to walk to the end of the Headland. Take my cushion."

So Biddy, her arms laden, made her way down the steps and along the ledge until she finally arrived at the platform. At the top of the lower flight which led down to it she paused and considered, for somebody was before her occupying the spot below and she had a typically British dislike of the close proximity of strangers, but at last she determined to go on and not to be daunted by the solitary woman who had dared to invade her territory.

So she descended the four or five steps with that "I-see-you-but-I'm-going-to-pretend-I-don't" air, and settled herself and her cushions and produced her work from her bag, trusting that her fellow-settler was not of the talkative kind.

She was quickly undeceived on this point for she had hardly put her needle into her embroidery before a voice assailed her ear.

"How nice to see the sun again, isn't it?"

Biddy groaned in spirit but as she could not very well entirely ignore the question she agreed politely.

"We're staying at the thatched cottage," proceeded the voice. "We arrived only yesterday. My husband has been ill, you know."

"My good creature, how on earth *should* I know," was what Biddy thought, but as she couldn't very well give expression to such a thought, she merely said, "How trying for you," in disinterested tones.

"*And* such an expense," pursued the stranger. "Pneumonia, double. A nurse, medicine, and I don't know what else, besides three boys to educate."

She spoke rather as if the education of the three boys was the direct result of her husband's double pneumonia.

"Helen and Edith have finished school, thank goodness. They're my girls, you know. My name's Edith, too. My *first* name. My second is Pernel. Such an odd name I always think, but my mother chose it. I didn't. I believe it's a feminine form of Peter. I was born on St. Peter's day, so perhaps that accounts for it, don't you think?"

"I should say it was extremely probable," assented Biddy, with the utmost gravity, thankful that she was alone with her companion and that Belle was not there to make her laugh.

She had hardly noticed the woman when she first arrived but now she turned and took stock of her.

She was middle-aged with a rather vacuous expression on her round, red, good-natured face but all the same there was something attractive about her. She looked like one with whom the Fates had not dealt over kindly, as if life was a problem she had never been quite able to solve, a riddle the answer to which she was ever seeking, but with it all there was an air of determination as though she were resolved not to be discouraged whatever blow the future might have in store for her.

She was dressed in a shabby blue serge skirt and an extraordinarily unbecoming cotton blouse patterned with broad stripes of alternate grass-green and drab. On her head, tilted rather far back, was a dark blue straw hat

with a band of ruby velvet meandering round the crown of it. A pair of gray cotton gloves, the fingers of which, Biddy observed, were mended with black thread, covered her hands which were podgy and fat, and black shoes, with a patch in the side of the left one, displayed, above their tops, stockings of an indeterminate hue which might have been either a dirty white or a washed-out khaki.

There was something rather pathetic about her and Biddy suddenly found herself, without any particular reason, feeling very sorry for her.

She put down the work she had just taken up and prepared to be nice to her.

"I hope you aren't still anxious about your husband," she said.

The poor woman's eyes filled with tears.

"I shouldn't be anxious if only he could get quite well and strong before he has to start work again. We can only afford a fortnight down here and he can't very well not go back to the office once he gets home again. He's a clerk in an insurance office," she explained. "The journey here is so expensive, isn't it, but the doctor insisted he should get right away. Such a nice man, the doctor, but I'm afraid not very happy in his domestic life. Perhaps you've heard of him? Durrant his name is, Doctor Durrant. Well, you know the way doctors talk, as if money was no object? 'Get him right away, Switzerland or the Tyrol,' he said. Of course those places were out of the question so I suggested Cornwall as it was the most right-away place I could think of on the spur of the moment and luckily he agreed, so here we are. The travelling rather tired him, so I'm keeping him in bed today."

"Tell me about your boys," Biddy said kindly.

A look of ecstatic pride came into the stranger's face.

"Such good boys," she said rapturously. "They've never given me a moment's uneasiness in the whole of their lives (I knew she'd say that, thought Biddy), except Fred, of course, when he was so ill with scarlet fever six years ago,

and you couldn't call that his fault, could you? He's fifteen now, and then there's Willie who's thirteen, and Josh. He's my baby. He's only eleven. They go to a grammar school. Rutter, the headmaster's called. So clever! An M. A., you know. Oxford. I'd have loved to have had another baby but Jack, my husband, you know, thought we'd quite enough with what we had, and I think he was right, don't you? It's a struggle to educate them as it is. I'd give anything to be able to send the boys to Oxford. I'm sure Fred is quite clever enough to be an M. A. like Mr. Rutter. You see, if my mother-in-law hadn't married against her people's wishes she'd have come in for a whole lot of money when her father died, but then, perhaps, she wouldn't have *been* my mother-in-law. These things are so puzzling, aren't they? My father-in-law was a Mr. Graindorge, the French for barleycorn, you know, only so much more distingué I always think. He was traveller for a firm of manufacturers somewhere in the Midlands. I can't quite remember what they manufactured, but that's neither here no there, is it? Anyhow, he fell in love with the head of the firm's daughter. Her father wouldn't hear of it, of course — though why he objected I can't imagine. It wasn't as if Mr. Graindorge was — well, you know what I *mean*. Some young men are, aren't they? But he wasn't like that, I'm sure. He was such a good old darling when I knew him. Always church twice on Sundays, wet or fine, as regular as clockwork, and I can assure you that I never once heard him out of temper, though he lived with us five years after we married, until he died, in fact. Well, as I was saying, her father wouldn't hear of it so they took the law into their own hands and ran away and got married. So romantic, I always thought, but her father didn't see it in that light. He never forgave her. She died when Jack was born, and Mr. Graindorge was so hurt about it that he never even troubled to write and tell him, though it might have made all the difference to Jack. As it was, every penny went to the son and her name wasn't even mentioned.

Of course he didn't even know of Jack's existence. It does seem rather hard, doesn't it? However, I daresay it's all for the best, though it's difficult to see why, but then Providence is like that, isn't it? So independent." She scrambled to her feet as she finished this rigmarole and held out a plump hand.

"Well, good-bye," she said effusively. "I must get back to Jack now. I've enjoyed our chat so much. If ever you're Putney way do come and see me. 13 Jerram Mansions is the address. I hope you won't be frightened away by the number. Some people think it unlucky, don't they, but I can't say I ever found it so. Don't forget the name. Graindorge, Mrs. John Graindorge. My father-in-law's name was James but as he's dead that doesn't matter, does it? What I mean to say is, it needn't muddle you."

She shook Biddy warmly by the hand as if she'd known her for years and stumped away up the rock steps, at the top of which she turned and waved a gray cotton glove.

"Mrs. John Graindorge, 13 Jerram Mansions, Putney. The French for barleycorn, you know. Huguenot, I should think, shouldn't you?" And with that she was gone, leaving Biddy breathless and exhausted.

CHAPTER XVIII

JOHN's holidays drew to a close, in some ways too rapidly, in others too slowly, for his liking.

Since that afternoon when he had put that question to Biddy which she had refused to answer, that afternoon on which he had intuitively guessed what she was holding back from him, he had found it difficult to regulate his conduct in a manner that, without giving away the fact of his discovery, should yet enable him to not exactly avoid her, but to spend less time in her and Roger's company. Now that he knew that he must hope for nothing, beyond the warm friendship which she had never denied him and which, since they had come together again, had been his in full measure, it was purgatory to him to be in her presence, especially when, as was often the case, Roger was there also. He found himself watching them avidly, noting each word, each look that passed between them, longing for Biddy's sake, dreading for his own, to see some reflection in Roger's speech or actions of the smouldering fire of her newly kindled emotions which, now that John knew they existed, every now and then, or so it seemed to him, threw out a sudden spurt of flame that was extinguished almost as soon as it was alight.

A sort of restraint sprang up between the three of them when he was there and once or twice he caught Biddy's eyes fixed on him with that mute appeal in them which he had observed after that memorable occasion when he had staked all and lost.

It was the night before he was returning to town. All day it had been warm and sultry and after dinner he and Roger, who had, with Mr. Peal's consent, kept that evening free that they might spend it together, went down to the bay on the further side of the Headland from the Porth.

The tide was coming in, but as yet it was but half way

up the bay, and over the great arm of land stretching out into the sea on their left hand, the moon, already past its first quarter, was shining down slantways on to the waves, turning their crests of white foam to silver. The wind, blowing from the north, was inclined to be chilly without the sun to counteract its bite, and they found shelter from it under the concrete wall which supported the little wooden platform where the steps which led down from the top of the cliff made a hairpin bend to reach the shore, following the contour of the cliff itself. This platform, a structure of some four feet square, had a wooden rail opposite the ascending stairs and, below this rail, the concrete wall went perpendicularly down to the beach, a drop of some fifteen feet so that anybody on the platform could not, unless they leaned over the rail, see anybody sitting immediately underneath.

Roger was squatting with his knees drawn up and his hands clasped round them with John beside him lying full length on his back, supporting his head with interlocked fingers.

"It is rot your having to go tomorrow," Roger said, looking down at the silent figure at his side.

John gave a little sigh.

"Dreams don't last forever," he said. "Sooner or later one has to wake up."

"Yes, but it's a beastly process," Roger said. "In another fortnight Biddy'll have gone too and then — " He stopped short and didn't finish the sentence.

"Then what?" asked John.

Roger gave a little nervous laugh.

"Why then I'll be going too in another month," he said.

It wasn't quite how he had meant to end the sentence. He had been going to say, "I don't know how I'm going to stick it when she's not here," but on second thoughts had evaded the climax.

"Yes, by the way," John said. "We've got to be on the lookout for another job, haven't we?"

Roger idly picked up a stone and let it drop again.

"I suppose so," he said slowly and without enthusiasm. "I suppose I shall have to take any old thing that comes along. Beggars can't be choosers, unfortunately." In sudden contrition he touched John's arm letting his fingers rest there for a moment so that the touch became a caress. "That was a putrid thing to say, old man, after all I owe you. I wasn't thinking what I was doing. But for you I should never have had this glorious time. Oh, I've lived this last two months. I didn't know what life was before."

"*Two* months. But you've been here four."

"Oh, well, the first two months I was only coming to life. Resuscitation's a lengthy job, you know." Roger shifted uneasily and looked down at John, sprawling at his side, in contemplative fashion.

"I — I suppose old what's-his-name left Biddy a pot of money, didn't he?" he asked after a moment's pause.

John, who had had his eyes closed, opened them suddenly and turned his head to get a better view of Roger. It was bright enough in the moonlight to distinguish every line of his face.

"Somewhere in the region of five thousand a year, I believe," John answered. "Why d'you want to know?"

"It's a frightful lot, isn't it?"

"That's a matter of comparison. I suppose to a Rothschild it would be a mere fleabite."

"And to a poor devil like myself an *embarras de richesses.*"

At this point John sat up and began to take notice. There was so much concentrated bitterness in Roger's voice that it was impossible to miss it.

"What d'you mean?" he enquired sharply.

"Oh, nothing in particular," replied Roger, growing restive under John's scrutiny. "Got a match on you?"

John produced a match from his pocket and handed it to Roger who lit a cigarette and then gave the box back.

It was so obviously a ruse to change the current of the

conversation that a growing conviction sprang up in John's mind that there was something behind it all. He knew it was a ruse because earlier on he had seen Roger with a nearly full box of vestas and it was quite out of the question that he could have used them all. He had an impression that Roger wanted to confide in him about something and was shying off, and he determined to keep him to the subject, whether he would or no. It might be that the moment he longed for (and dreaded!) was at hand and at the bare idea of such a thing he felt his heart pounding in his breast.

"Why d'you say Biddy's income would be an '*embarras de richesses*' to a poor devil like yourself," he asked.

"I didn't say Biddy's income particularly," Roger answered captiously. "I said five thousand a year."

"D'you mean to say you'd object to five thousand a year?" John demanded to know.

"It 'ud all depend," answered Roger with reservation.

"Depend on what?"

"Well on — how it came to one."

"There are four ways in which a man can accumulate a fortune. Inheritance, success in business, lucky speculation — and matrimony," said John deliberately, ticking off the items one by one on his fingers. "Which of those would you object to?"

"Matrimony," Roger said boldly.

"But supposing you were in love with a woman who had — well, let's keep to the five thousand a year, as that's the figure we started the discussion with. D'you mean honestly to tell me that, just because she had that money, you'd chuck away your happiness and, possibly, hers?"

"It wouldn't be my happiness," Roger said. "Look here, John. You've run me often enough for being what you're pleased to call obstinate. Well I am obstinate. I freely admit I'm also proud, and, since our discussion seems to be assuming a more or less concrete form with me as the dreadful example, let's imagine, for the sake of argu-

ment, that I, an obstinate devil, I, as I am at the present, a pauper, who, until lately, was a tramp and outcast, am in love with — with a rich woman, and supposing, also for the sake of argument, that I was to marry her. Can you see me, who've not got two pennies to rub against one another, much less enough money to be even a parlour-boarder in my wife's house, can you see me dependent upon her for everything — the clothes I wear, the food I put into my mouth, the roof that covers me? Can you see me bastardising my pride, laying my honour in the dust? Why, man, I tell you that if I deliberately placed myself in a position like that, the very stones would cry out. Every time I put my hand in my pocket and took out a coin to pay for something, I should be reminding myself, 'You fraud! That's not *your* money you're using. You're living on the charity of your predecessor. It's the money he left to his widow that clothes and feeds and shelters you. You're taking advantage of the bounty of a man who's dead and can't prevent it.' How long do you think I should be happy under those circumstances?"

He stopped and threw out his arms with a gesture of despair, and John pricked up his ears.

In his vehemence Roger had made three slips which John was quick to fasten upon. He talked about his "predecessor," he had spoken of the hypothetical rich woman as a widow, when no word had passed which might have suggested that she was not a spinster, and he had used the expression "the bounty of a man who's dead," all of which went to prove that, without realising his blunder, he had lapsed from the general to the particular, from the impersonal to the personal, and was drawing upon what his own feelings would be in some specific case to support his theories.

There was only one person who fitted into the case which he so obviously had in his own mind and to whom the description applied, and that was Biddy. John had no doubt whatever on that score.

Strangely enough, even now he felt no resentment against Roger. He knew that, according to all traditions, his paramount desire ought to be to seize his unconscious rival by the throat and strangle the life out of him, but he felt no such desire. In every book he had read in which love for a woman interposed itself as a barrier between two friends, the greater their original affection for one another, the greater their subsequent hatred, but there was nothing of that sort here. There was an impersonal element about the whole affair which seemed to put him right outside it. He felt like a spectator at a play who watches the unrolling of the plot with absorbed interest but who knows that, whatever the outcome of it, it will not affect him directly one jot or one tittle.

His own cause was hopeless — he had no illusions about that — so the only thing that mattered now was Biddy's happiness, and if it was in his power to advance that happiness by any means, he would do so at whatever cost to himself.

It was the same yielding up of self which had come to him that night when he had knelt at the feet of the ivory Christ in the bedroom in Eddis Street and cried out "Lord, what wouldst Thou have me to do"; that night when he had thought of Biddy, Roger and himself as three tiny cogs in the world's wheel, each in their predestined place. His place had been already allotted to him and it was beyond his control to alter it now.

"And that's only one side of the picture," Roger was going on in hopeless tones. "There's the other side as well. There are always a number of kind people in a case like this — like we've been imagining — to set the ball of scandal rolling. The whisper would go round that I had married, not for love, but for money. Nobody would believe otherwise and the whisper would become an articulate sound, growing louder and louder until it developed into a shout, and, in time, it would reach her ears. Then the insidious poison would begin to work. The seed of doubt

would throw out its little shoots which would spread and spread like some noxious weed, until they choked everything else. Gradually love and trust and the very power of reasoning would be killed off and happiness would be at an end."

"All the same, Roger, I think you're wrong," John said quietly. "I think the woman ought to be given the chance. If she was *sure* of her man she'd be proof against whatever malicious people might choose to say. She'd be willing to take the risk."

"Then I wouldn't be willing to take it for her," Roger said vehemently. "There's the double risk, remember. I couldn't be happy battening on a dead man's money, and if I were unhappy she'd be unhappy too, and her unhappiness would be in proportion to her love for me. If — if I cared for a woman situated like that, I'd tear my tongue out by the roots sooner than run the risk of spoiling her life by putting her in such a position."

"Even if the woman happened to be Biddy?" John asked point blank.

Roger looked at him for a moment in startled silence, then suddenly dropped his face into his hands with a little stifled groan. "God," John heard him mutter below his breath, and then there was absolute stillness, broken only by the noise of the waves crashing on the shore.

For a full minute, which seemed like an eternity, he sat there with his face buried while John watched and waited, but at last he lifted his head and the man at his side could see his features, in the bright light of the moon, set in grim, tense lines.

"How did you guess?" All the youthful ring had gone out of Roger's voice and it sounded cold and lifeless.

"Dear old man, you've been telling me for the last five minutes," John said, a great gush of sympathy welling up in his heart for this boy whom, in spite of everything, he loved.

He hesitated for a second, trying to find the right words for what he wanted to say.

"You aren't going to be an obstinate ass and spoil your life — and Biddy's — for a bit of damned quixotism?" he said at length. "Happiness isn't so cheap that you can afford to throw it away for the sake of a misguided principle. Listen to reason."

He laid his hand on Roger's knee as he spoke, but he impatiently jerked his leg away.

"I'd spoil Biddy's life if I married her, as things are," Roger said doggedly, and now his voice rang out loud and distinct. "Look here, John, you've guessed that I love Biddy. Well, I do. I'm not ashamed to own it. I love her with every ounce of strength in my soul and body. I love every separate hair on her head just because it's a part of her. Dear God! how I love her. Every moment of my life before I knew her was a moment wasted. Every moment of my life after — after she's gone out of it, will be bitter-sweet with the memory of her. My love for her is so — tremendous, that I could sweep her away in the torrent of it if I opened the floodgates of my heart, but I'm not going to do anything of the kind. It's because my love for her is what it is, that I've been able to keep silence and carry on as though it didn't exist and it's because of that I shall go on keeping silence. It's better, a thousand times better, to break my own heart than run the risk of breaking hers."

He stopped, exhausted by the violence of his emotion, and once more hid his face in his hands.

"So Biddy's to have no voice in the matter," John said dryly. "It's Pride versus Love — and Pride wins."

Roger sprang to his feet.

"You can say what you like," he cried passionately. "Nothing you can say will alter my determination though. It's easy enough to sneer when you aren't the one to go through with it. I know what I'm about, Perhaps you think because you beat down my pride once before that you can do it again, that you've the right to dictate, to regulate my life down to its very essence, because you picked me

out of the gutter and wiped me down and set me on my feet again. Listen to me, then.

"I swear before Almighty God that, while Biddy has one single penny of that money that came to her from her husband, I'll never marry her even if she'd have me. Does that prove to you that I'm resolved?"

John had risen to his feet while Roger was speaking, and the two men stood there face to face in the moonlight, Roger with one hand raised above his head, the forefinger pointing upwards as though invoking the God before whom he made his declaration, John with both his clenched down by his sides in the supreme effort to control his feelings and check the flow of angry words which sprang to his lips because he knew that, if he once let himself go, he would say things that afterwards, when it was too late to retract, he would bitterly repent. He was furiously angry with Roger but he had sufficient wits left him to realise that the boy was beside himself and hardly knew what he was saying.

So engrossed were the two in the stress of their several emotions that neither of them noticed, as they could have done by glancing up, the figure of a woman standing on the little wooden platform just above their heads to whom every word of their conversation was distinctly audible, even through the roar of the sea.

Biddy had felt restless and uneasy that evening, and, after trying to distract herself with one thing after another, music, Patience and sewing, had discarded them in turn and wandered aimlessly about the room unable to settle to anything.

"Go out for a bit," suggested Miss Bellamy, to whom she confided her feelings, and whose nerves, to tell the truth, Biddy was rather getting on.

Biddy instantly brightened up at the proposal.

"I think I will," she said. "Will you come with me?"

"I most certainly will not," said Miss Bellamy decidedly, "I've enough of the cat in me to love my own fireside. Even

when there isn't a fire," she added a little ruefully, glancing at the empty hearth.

"I want to do something really energetic," Biddy observed. "What would you advise?"

"Go down the steps to Morant Bay and then climb up them again," Miss Bellamy recommended her. "That ought to take the stuffing out of any woman. You'll come back as gentle as a sucking dove.

"That's a good idea, Belle. I think I'll carry it out."

Biddy went upstairs and changed her shoes and slipped a gray cloak over her dinner dress.

"I'm off," she announced, putting her head in at the door of the drawing room when she came down again.

"Thank goodness for that," said Miss Bellamy gratefully. "Another five minutes doing the hosts of Midian stunt round the room and I'd have screamed out loud, or else have carried out the programme laid down in the hymn and have up and smited you."

"Sweet thing. I can always rely on you for sympathy," retorted Biddy.

She went out and when she got out on to the road turned down to the right. The road dipped down to the level of the sea, then rose again steeply until it reached the top of the cliffs from which a broad stretch of grassy turf separated it. Here it was that the steps led down to the bay, a hundred and fifty feet below, and Biddy, crossing the grass, commenced the descent.

It was not until she reached the platform nearly at the bottom, where the steps turned sharply to the right, that she was aware of voices immediately underneath her, and recognised them for those of John and Roger. So they had slunk off here without telling her they were going or inviting her to accompany them, had they? All right! They must be punished for that.

She pulled a great lump of some soft growing stuff out of the face of the cliff and, advancing cautiously, leaned over the rail to locate them in order to drop it on their heads.

She had it poised in her hands ready to let it go when a sentence floated up to her ears and caused her to remain motionless in the position in which she happened to be.

It was Roger who was speaking.

"Look here, John. You've guessed that I love Biddy. Well, I do. I'm not ashamed to own it. I love her with every ounce of strength in my soul and body —"

She stood there motionless, the bunch of soft green clasped against her breast, her lips parted in a little smile of almost incredulous happiness, listening to the words pouring out of his mouth. She wasn't conscious of the fact that she was deliberately eavesdropping, and if she had been she wouldn't have cared. Some of the words were drowned in the roar of the breakers, but those she did hear told her all she wanted to know.

"Pride versus Love — and Pride wins," she heard John say. What did he mean by that? Then Roger's voice, angry and loud, saying something about John picking him out of the gutter and setting him on his feet again, and then, finally, that culminating sentence, every word of which came to her clear and resonant as a bell: "I swear before Almighty God that, while Biddy has one single penny of that money that came to her from her husband, I'll never marry her, even if she'd have me. Does that prove that I'm resolved?"

Then Biddy did a strange thing for, dropping the armful of green stuff at her feet, she kissed both hands in Roger's direction.

"Dear silly," she whispered, softly. "Love wins every time."

Then, fearful lest one of the two below might look up and catch sight of her, she turned and, picking up her skirts, ran quickly up the steps and vanished.

CHAPTER XIX

The following morning John went back to town.

There was the same trio to see him off that had been at the station to welcome him on his arrival, and, in addition, his mother and Miss Bellamy.

Each of the five assembled on the platform was in a slightly abnormal mood. Biddy, though she would not have admitted it for worlds, even to herself, was the tiniest bit relieved to see John go. His aunt was numb with the certainty that, before another twelve months came round, her nephew would have succumbed to some fell disease contracted in a London slum; Roger, deeply contrite for the somewhat ungracious attitude he had displayed the evening previous, was alternately effacing himself and being overofficious in seeing after the luggage, buying papers for the journey, etc.; Mrs. Ffoulkes, who had newly risen from a bed of symptomatic sickness, whither she had betaken herself with a string with twenty knots in it and a volume on autosuggestion, was frankly more interested in the extraordinary force of will power she had brought to bear to leave her couch and be up at the station at the unearthly hour of eleven thirty than in John's departure; while Miss Bellamy was, as frankly, in a condition of extreme and undisguised irritability, due to the fact that a telegram had arrived from Carrie Panter, just as they were setting out for the station, announcing that the lady and her brother were hoping to reach Hine, where they had taken rooms at the George Hotel for a fortnight, that evening.

"There you are, you see," she said to John, when she managed, with a little manoeuvring, to get him apart from the others and tell him of the dreadful news. "Didn't I warn you what would happen? And here you are going back to your tiresome old East-Enders just at the very

moment you're really wanted. What the blazes is the good of a landmark that scours the country and doesn't stop in one place?"

John gave a rueful laugh.

"We over estimated the value of a landmark, I'm afraid," he said. "You see people get so accustomed to seeing them always there that they end by not seeing them at all. I don't think you need worry, though. I've got a kind of idea that our mutual friend, Mr. Reggie Franklin, has not chosen an altogether opportune moment in which to press his suit, if that's what you're afraid of."

At this point Mrs. Ffoulkes bore down upon them. She hadn't got out of bed three hours before her usual time to have another woman monopolising her son and usurping the position of leading lady, least of all Miss Bellamy whom she had never really quite liked since that memorable day when she had called upon her with reference to Roger's conduct in presuming to go for walks with Biddy.

"Excuse me," she said with distant politeness, rather in the tones she would have employed had Miss Bellamy been a complete stranger whom she was stretching across to reach the salt-cellar.

Miss Bellamy, under the circumstances, had no choice left her but to give way before her superior claims, but she wasn't going to pretend she was pleased.

"I'll write to you and let you know what happens," she said, moving away.

"What happens about *what?*" enquired Mrs. Ffoulkes, scenting a mystery, as Miss Bellamy intended she should do. Miss Bellamy was out of earshot by this time, or she would never have demeaned herself to ask the question.

"Oh, nothing much," John replied. "How's the neuralgia?"

Mrs. Ffoulkes, thus suddenly recalled to a remembrance of the particular ailment she was cultivating at the moment, winced perceptibly.

"We won't waste time discussing that, dear," she

observed bravely. "I don't want to throw any gloom over our last few minutes together." She shook her head forebodingly. "Doctor Cator dosen't *say* much about it, but I can see he's puzzled," she added.

"Don't you think it was almost a pity you left Dr. Crowe, Mother?" John said.

"Dr. Crowe wasn't sympathetic," Mrs. Ffoulkes explained. "A nice enough man in his *way*, I daresay, but he didn't understand me. He confessed himself he could find absolutely nothing wrong with me, in spite of my telling him what was the matter, so of course, after that, I lost confidence in him."

"Of course," John said automatically. "I'd better be getting back to my seat now."

"I'm not going to wait to see you off," Biddy declared when he got back to the knot round the carriage door. "It's frightfully unlucky. I'll see you when I come home, won't I, John?"

"Rather," John said, with what cheerfulness he could muster. "When do you leave here?"

"The fourteenth," she told him. "This day fortnight, so I'll expect you to lunch on the nineteenth."

"So kind to my boy always, dear Biddy," murmured Mrs. Ffoulkes with an effusion she would not have thought of demonstrating if Biddy had been, say, a poor governess instead of what she was. "So kind to everybody," she went on. "*Foolishly* kind, in some cases, I sadly fear. I know your warm heart. You mustn't let it be *imposed* upon, you know."

"I'm not going to let it be, I promise you, Mrs. Ffoulkes," asserted Biddy confidently.

"*That's* right, dear. Come in and have a chat one afternoon. I shall be so lonely, now dear John has gone. We'll make all *sorts* of plans for him. A nice little vicarage in the country, not too far from Porth Ros, and a nice little wife to share it with him, eh?" she said archly.

It was evident John had not consulted his "best friend"

on the subject of the nice little vicarage next door to the glue factory, or if he had, that she was determined to ignore it.

Mrs. Ffoulkes' intention with regard to her son's future was so obvious and so utterly lacking in finesse or stratagem that it was not difficult to guess at her meaning and both the victims blushed a fiery red.

"That'll be great fun," Biddy said, bringing out the first words that came into her head in order to relieve the tension. "Well, good-bye, John. See you soon."

"Good-bye, old man." Roger stood on the step of the carriage and put his shoulders through the window, effectually blocking it up.

"Sorry about last night. Afraid I lost my head a bit. I didn't mean what I said about you and me. I meant all the rest though," he said in low tones which only John could hear, then, before the latter could make any reply, he was off down the platform with Biddy and Miss Bellamy, leaving Mrs. Ffoulkes and Miss Gunning to bid farewell in their turn.

Miss Gunning was grateful to Biddy for not waiting to see the train off. She didn't know whether it was an excuse to give her and her sister the last few minutes alone with John or whether she really did object to watching the departure of any one but, whatever the real reason, Miss Gunning was none the less glad not to have to say good-bye to him under the eyes of these comparative strangers. It was not that she had much opportunity of any last words with John for Mrs. Ffoulkes stood squarely up against the door of the railway carriage and she herself was forced to be content with gazing at her nephew through the glass of the side window but even that was, as it were, a private view from which the general public was excluded and, since as usual she had entirely made up her mind that it was the last time she would ever see him again in this world, it was something to be able to fix in her mind each detail of the beloved features.

John's mother and aunt always saw him off at the end of his holiday as though he were departing for the interior of some distant and savage unknown country where the chances of his ever coming through alive were small.

Mrs. Ffoulkes, whose familiarity with London was confined to an occasional stay of a couple of nights at one of those hotels near the British Museum where the lone, lorn female is specially catered for, had a rooted idea which nothing would eradicate that the East End of the metropolis was composed entirely of thieves' kitchens and Chinese opium dens interspersed with frequent public houses.

With hazy recollections of Jack the Ripper, she populated the district with a race far more cunning and blood-thirsty than the cunningest and most blood-thirsty red Indian that ever stalked through the pages of Fennimore Cooper, and she derived a melancholy satisfaction from the lurid pictures painted by her imagination. If all else failed she could always make her anxiety an excuse for the sympathy of her friends and hold it to account for her wretched health.

Miss Gunning, on the other hand, as has been seen, brooded over the risk John ran of contracting some virulent disease in the course of his ministrations and lay awake at nights whenever the weather was either unduly hot or cold, kept from sleep by the haunting certainty that her nephew had fallen a victim to heat apoplexy or pneumonia according to whichever extremity the thermometer displayed. Her anxiety endured for the whole period of John's absence whereas Mrs. Ffoulkes, at the end of a fortnight, had forgotten that such things as thieves' kitchens and opium dens existed and never allowed the thought of them to disturb her night's repose. She owed it to her health, she said, to try to snatch an hour or two of sleep.

. . . . . .

Mrs. Panter's telegram had come in the nature of a bombshell to Miss Bellamy who had believed that lady safe in Scotland. Even Biddy had been somewhat taken aback by it and had exhibited no particular transports of delight

at the prospect of Carrie's impending arrival. Not even the fact that Mr. Franklin was to accompany his sister produced any expressions of satisfaction from the recipient of the wire and that, at any rate, was a source of gratification to Miss Bellamy, though she was considerably put out when Biddy, on leaving the station, announced her intention of calling at the George Hotel to make sure about the rooms being comfortable, a quite unnecessary proceeding, Miss Bellamy asserted, for the George was one of the best and most expensive hotels in Hine and would not be likely to have rooms that were *not* comfortable.

She was over ruled however and followed Biddy with a bad grace and, when the latter insisted on going upstairs and inspecting the apartments reserved as per wire, tartly refused to accompany her, but, instead, sat down in the hall, very erect in an upright chair, stubbornly determined not to participate in any of the comforts which Carrie Panter was presently to enjoy.

Roger had left them to go back to his work so Miss Bellamy was alone with her thoughts and, having nobody with whom she could share them, sat and brooded over the prospects of the immediate future until she was thoroughly depressed.

That some definite object lay behind this visit to Hine of Mrs. Panter and her brother (and more particularly of the latter), Miss Bellamy was positive. Mr. Reggie Franklin was not the kind of man to give up any of the pleasant shooting parties which he was wont to frequent at this period of the year in order to spend a fortnight at the seaside with his sister, unless he hoped to gain something by so doing.

Biddy kept up a fairly regular correspondence with her friend and, no doubt, had mentioned the fact that John was spending his holiday at Porth Ros. It looked to Miss Bellamy rather as if Mrs. Panter had got the wind up with regard to him and was nervous lest her brother might lose ground. Mr. Franklin was, as she had recognised in

London, entirely under the thumb of his astute sister and quite content to leave her to stage-manage his affairs and if she decided that a visit to Hine was necessary would fall in with her views without demur.

What did John mean by that remark of his that Mr. Reggie Franklin had not chosen an opportune moment in which to press his suit? Could it be that there was anything between John and Biddy? Mrs. Ffoulkes had broadly hinted at such a consummation in that ridiculous speech of hers at the station about a "nice little vicarage in the country not too far from Porth Ros and a nice little wife to share it with him." And certainly both John and Biddy had looked foolish enough to lead anybody to suppose that there was something in it, but somehow Miss Bellamy didn't think there was. Still, Mrs. Panter might, nevertheless, be anxious on that score and feel the necessity of not only being on the spot herself to see, with her own eyes, exactly what was happening, but also of her brother being there to cut in if the opportunity arose. That must be it, of course. There wasn't anybody else to be a cause of uneasiness. Suddenly Miss Bellamy stiffened herself. Nobody else! Of course there was somebody else. What about Roger? A hundred incidents, hitherto relegated to the lumber room of her brain as not worth a second thought, flashed into her mind and assumed a new significance. She recollected with misgiving her perturbation after that momentous interview with Mrs. Ffoulkes, and how she had dismissed her fears with the assurance that, in the new order of things, Platonic friendship was so common as hardly to call for comment. Was it Roger? Was John in the secret? Had Biddy, in all innocence, raised any suspicions in Mrs. Panter's mind? And supposing that it were so? How did Biddy stand then?

Miss Bellamy liked Roger well enough, but the same thought occurred to her that had occurred to Miss Gunning. Biddy was a rich woman, Roger a poor man. What a temptation to one in his peculiar position to seize such an oppor-

tunity. Biddy, in spite of her twenty-nine years and the experience of marriage, was such a child still in many ways, with a childlike trust in her fellow creatures which survived every ordeal to which it was subjected and even found excuses for any lapse from the strict path of honour when one was forced upon her notice.

Miss Bellamy felt that perhaps after all she had been wrong and Mrs. Ffoulkes right in their respective attitudes towards the potentialities of Platonic friendships.

She had reached a point in her surmisings when they had already assumed the proportions of accomplished facts but here, luckily, her sound commonsense reasserted itself. The foe was at the gate in the persons of Carrie Panter and her brother. For the present she would concentrate on them and let the rest go hang.

Mrs. Panter, when she had met John and Roger at Biddy's house four months previously and had learned that they were all to foregather in Cornwall, had felt a momentary uneasiness but the slight concern she had experienced had quickly died away; indeed she had almost, if not quite, forgotten all about it when it was revived by a letter which she received from Biddy and in which the names of John and Roger occurred with disquieting frequency.

She was not one to let the grass grow under her feet. She had marked Biddy down as her brother's and she wasn't going to run any risks of letting her slip for want of a little exertion; so, although she was in Scotland enjoying herself thoroughly according to her wont, she tore herself away, telegraphed to her brother to meet her in town, and, when he obeyed her summons, whisked him off to Cornwall post haste.

Reggie Franklin was one of those indolent people who are content to let other people do all the work for them and it was his sister who had stage-managed his courtship of Biddy (if it could be dignified by such a name), from the beginning. He didn't object to the courtship but he

would never have exerted himself to pursue Biddy to Cornwall if Mrs. Panter had not insisted. Her share in the matter was not altogether a disinterested one. She was rather tired of being called upon to get her brother out of tight corners and, though her husband gave her an adequate allowance for her needs, it did not run to Reggie's needs as well; and when it came to her having to foot the bill for a diamond pendant supplied to a lady not unknown to fame in a certain substratum of society she cast round to find somebody better able to stand the strain of Reggie's financial entanglements than herself, and her choice fell upon Biddy. It was quite as much of importance to her, therefore, as to her brother that there should be no slip between the cup and the lip, and the adage that absence makes the heart grow fonder having apparently proved its falsity, and mistrusting the propinquity of the two unplaced young men whom she had met at Biddy's house in London, she determined that Reggie's presence was necessary as an antidote. Besides which, she felt more competent to deal with the situation on the spot.

It was something of a relief to her to find that one of them had gone as it enabled her to keep a closer watch on the remaining one and, being a strategist, she came to the conclusion that the best way to do it was to seek his company upon every possible occasion, this procedure serving a double purpose for it cleared the field for her brother to make hay in while the sun shone while, at the same time, it prevented Roger being too often alone with Biddy. These, it must be explained, were only cautionary measures, for she saw nothing in the behaviour of either Biddy or Roger to rouse her suspicions in the slightest degree. Still, one never knew, and it did no harm to be on the safe side.

Knowing nothing of the real state of affairs, for each was acting a part to deceive the other, she was soon lulled into a false security and it was therefore a rude shock to her when Reggie came to her room one night after they had been at Hine a week, with the unwelcome intelligence that he had

proposed to Biddy and that she had definitely and unmistakably refused him and, moreover, had distinctly given him to understand that there was no hope for him in the future and that her answer must be regarded as absolutely final. Mrs. Panter was inclined to be nasty about it.

"You blundering fool," she said angrily, restraining an intense desire to slap him. "Why couldn't you wait? I never meant you to do it yet. I suppose you barged in at some inappropriate moment. You've spoilt everything now with your usual clumsiness. Why the devil couldn't you wait till I gave you the tip?"

"Oh, yes, say it's my fault," grumbled the rejected suitor gloomily. "I suppose next you'll be telling me I ought to have let you do the asking. You're always so jolly cocksure of yourself. You pretend you're such a pal of Biddy Rycroft's and talk by the yard about how she confides in you, and yet you didn't even know there was another man."

Mrs. Panter who, while her brother was delivering himself of the foregoing speech, had returned to her occupation of brushing her hair, an occupation which Reggie's entrance had momentarily interrupted, put the brush down on the dressing table and swung round to face him.

"Another man! *What* other man?" she demanded incredulously.

"How the devil should I know?" asked her brother savagely. "D'you suppose she'd tell me a thing like that?"

"Did she tell you there was another man?" demanded Mrs. Panter peremptorily.

"Practically. I asked her point blank and she got her claws out straight away. Wanted to know what the hell it had got to do with me. Slung a lot of back chat about minding my own business. Presumed she wasn't answerable to me for her own private affairs, and so on and so forth. Another man? Of course there's another man. She gave herself away over and over again. I'll tell you what, Carrie, I'm darned well out of it. For all her demure

looks Biddy's got the devil's own temper when she gets going."

"You don't mean to say you're going to be warned off like that and just cave in without a struggle? You and your damned tactlessness. What on earth made you go and ask a silly, rotten question like that? Any woman would be furious. You've delayed matters for at least three months."

"Three months! I tell you, Carrie, I'm out of the running for good and all."

"Rubbish! A woman when she talks about the future means any time within the next three months. She can't afford to look further ahead. There wasn't any man when Biddy left London, that I'll swear, so, if there is one now, it's some one she met down here. She's not mentioned anybody in her letters to me except that wretched parson we met at dinner that night and the youth who goes about with bare legs. I wonder — " she paused and considered.

"But I say!" expostulated Reggie. "He's a — a sort of attendant or something of that sort to that old lunatic who digs for mussels all day. She couldn't — "

His sister gave him a disdainful glance.

"My dear Reggie," she said, "why should you imagine men have the monopoly of philandering with those who are — well, not exactly in their own class? I seem to remember several young women in a different walk of life to your own on whom you set your affections. I recollect perfectly a young person who was employed as a mannequin at Madame Empson's,— Edie Cruikshank, I think the name was — who contrived to wangle an offer of marriage out of you."

Reggie wriggled uneasily in his chair.

"Why not? She was perfectly straight."

"Perfectly, I should say. At any rate she refused to accept any monetary compensation for the mending of her broken heart," sneered Mrs. Panter. "I'm not saying a word against her character. I'm merely pointing out to

you that human affections are not always confined within the narrow limits of class distinctions, and that the breaking down of social barriers where love is concerned is not limited to the male sex. Besides, when all is said and done, Mr. Dibden may be, as you say, old what's-his-name's attendant but that doesn't alter the fact that he's a gentleman."

"Gentleman be damned," said Reggie explosively. "Why the feller's nothing more or less than an upper servant. He ought to be walking out with the housemaid, not going about with Biddy just as if he was as good as she."

"Do you mean the housemaid or Miss Cruikshank?" enquired Mrs. Panter sweetly. "Don't be a fool, Reggie. What a man is has nothing to do with either his morals or his manners. Whether you like it or not, we've got to take the fact that Mr. Dibden is a gentleman into our reckoning."

"It strikes me we're getting on a bit too fast. We don't know whether he's the man yet, for certain," Reggie observed.

"Leave that to me," his sister said. "Look here. You'd better clear out of this and let me manage it alone. Go back to the Nelsons. I'll say you were called away by business. If I'm to make any sort of job at it, I must do it my own way without you butting in and upsetting things."

"It's Sunday tomorrow. There aren't any trains from this God-forsaken hole," Reggie complained.

"There are from Truro. Motor there and catch one."

"But I saw Biddy only this evening. She'll know I couldn't have been called away on business," he objected.

His sister stamped her foot impatiently.

"All the better if she does. She'll think it's because your heart's broken at her refusing you. Go away now and leave me to think, and look here, don't give up the match because you're down on the first hole. This has got to be pulled through if possible. My dear husband's just the

teeniest bit inclined to kick at the notion of my paying your bills instead of my own and if you aren't jolly careful he'll screw me up so tight that I shan't be able to help you any more, however willing I may be. It'll be Upper Tooting and the Tree for you then, not St. James and the Ritz. Don't say I didn't warn you. Good-night, old boy."

Mrs. Panter was far too astute to try to glean the true state of affairs from Biddy herself. She betook herself to church the following morning, after seeing her brother off, carrying in her hand a large ivory-bound prayer book with gold filigree corners to it and as she went straight from matins down to lunch with Biddy, without calling in at the hotel on her way, it stood to reason that the somewhat conspicuous book went with her.

Mrs. Panter was always prepared for eventualities and in this case her foresight was justified, for just before she reached The Windy Mount, Mrs. Ffoulkes rumbled past her in a hired fly on her way back from the service at Surridge. She had met Carrie at tea with Biddy one day but she would probably not have stopped the carriage as she did if the ivory prayer book had not caught her eye. Anybody who advertised her church-going so boldly was certainly to be encouraged, she considered.

"Pull up, Towers," she commanded, prodding the unfortunate driver with the point of her umbrella as she did so. "I'll get out here and walk the rest of the way with Mrs. — er."

"Panter, Kathleen," prompted Miss Gunning, who occupied the seat beside her, in a loud whisper.

"I'm quite aware, Sibyl," said Mrs. Ffoulkes, with offended dignity. "Mrs. Pantile. Towers, take Miss Gunning on."

So the carriage was stopped and Mrs. Ffoulkes, with a great deal of stout leg encased in black worsted, climbed labouriously out of the vehicle which rolled on bearing her sister in it.

"You've been to church, I see," she observed, fixing the tome under her companion's arm with a gimlet eye.

"Oh, yes," returned Mrs. Panter, in tones that implied that it was her regular habit to attend church. "I went to St. James'," she added, wishing she knew what Mrs. Ffoulkes's views were, as that would have given her the opportunity of condemning or approving the form of service accordingly.

"I'm lunching with Biddy," she went on, after a little pause, during which Mrs. Ffoulkes, beyond a non-committal "Ah," gave no indication of her likes or dislikes in the matter of church services. "I suppose that nice Mr. Dibden will be there. He's a good deal at The Windy Mount, isn't he?"

"Too much," said Mrs. Ffoulkes weightily. "If Biddy isn't very careful she'll be getting herself talked about. A young man in his position is apt to take advantage of it without any encouragement."

"Oh, but surely, dear Mrs. Ffoulkes, you aren't suggesting that Biddy actually *encourages* him?" exclaimed Carrie Panter in accents which skillfully combined horror and incredulity.

"Biddy makes a *companion* of him," Mrs. Ffoulkes informed her, ominously shaking her head. "If that isn't encouraging him, I don't know what you call it. A word in season from you, dear Mrs. Pantile, might stop the poor silly child before it's too late to draw back."

"Not to Biddy," said Mrs. Panter judicially. "That would be fatal, but perhaps I might see my way to have a little talk with the young man. Young men generally listen to my advice," she concluded with becoming modesty.

"Ah, you like mothering them, I can see," Mrs. Ffoulkes observed. "Well, my dear, do what you can."

"Oh, indeed I will," Carrie said earnestly, taking advantage of the fact that Mrs. Ffoulkes was staring straight ahead, to make a face at her. Mothering them indeed!

"My son, John — you haven't met my son I think, Mrs. — er —-"

"Oh, yes I have. *Such* a dear, if you'll forgive my saying so, Mrs. Ffoulkes," Mrs. Panter exclaimed ecstatically. "I met him at Biddy's house in town."

"My son John was inclined to be attracted by Biddy at one time," continued Mrs. Ffoulkes, rambling on. "But now — I really don't know what to think — The dream of my life that I should live to see him happily married and all that. I hinted — oh quite *delicately*, you know,— when he was at home, the last night before he left, in fact, that perhaps, some day, he and dear Biddy might come together, and he was quite angry, furious, I might almost say, at the very suggestion. Said he and Biddy were nothing but friends and would never be anything else. Do you know I was left with the curious impression that he *knew* something, and I couldn't help wondering whether perhaps — well, Biddy has only herself to blame if people jump to conclusions. Dear me! Here we are at the gate of The Windy Mount and I meant to have told you what Doctor Cator said to me when he came to see me last Wednesday. It *was* so interesting, but I can't tell you in the road in case anybody overhears. Come to tea one afternoon and I'll tell you then."

"I'd love to," said Mrs. Panter mendaciously. "Good-bye."

"Good-bye, dear Mrs. — er — "

CHAPTER XX

Carrie Panter, when it suited her purpose, could make herself very charming and womanly and (though she had objected to Mrs. Ffoulkes employing the expression) motherly, and she proceeded to bring these qualities into play now with Roger.

She was far too clever to attempt to appropriate him but when she could do it without her intention being too obvious she would contrive to separate him from the rest of the party on some pretext or another and, once she had him to herself, would skillfully draw him on to talk of himself by feigning an interest in him which not only flattered his vanity but invited confidence.

Roger didn't go quite so far as to give her a full and particular history of his original introduction to Biddy, but she gathered, more from his expressions of gratitude than from any precise statement on his part, that it was to Biddy and John that he owed what comparative well-being he enjoyed now.

It rather alarmed her to learn that Biddy had played the part of ministering angel. Pity was too akin to love to allow her to view the situation with complete equanimity, and the danger which, up to now, she had regarded as problematical, began to take on definite shape and to appear less improbable than had at first seemed likely.

She didn't fall into the error, as her brother had done, of confounding birth and position. She recognized the indisputable fact that Roger was a gentleman, but in the set to which she belonged and to which she aspired that Biddy should also belong, gentle birth, unless backed up by money or, at any rate, the plausibility of money, was of no account. To "have a good time" — at somebody else's expense if possible, but by hook or by crook to have

it,—was the aim and object of each member of it, and it was each for himself and the devil take the hindermost. If one fell out of the ranks nobody bothered about him. The rabble swept on and left him, without so much as a backward glance of regret.

In some ways, the fact that she realised that Roger was a gentleman made her task more difficult. Had he been Biddy's inferior in class she could have used blunter methods than were admissible under the circumstances; less subtlety would have been required.

However, Mrs. Panter was a past-mistress in the art of diplomacy and was equal to the occasion.

Roger was an ingenuous youth and she found no difficulty in obtaining his confidence up to a point, but, in spite of all her endeavours, she could get nothing out of him as to his exact feelings towards Biddy, try as she might. He made no attempt to hide his gratitude but beyond that he would not go, and she had almost begun to think she was on the wrong tack when a conversation she had with him suddenly roused her suspicions.

She had got Roger to herself by the simple expedient of waylaying him on the beach one afternoon and asking him to show her the caves with which the cliffs were studded, and more particularly the fern cave, which was about half a mile along the shore, the roof of which was hung with sea ferns. She abominated walking on the sand, though, for the most part, it was dry and hard, for there were, here and there, little streams which overflowed from the rock pools and meandered down to the edge of the sea and so shallow were they that they were difficult to see and you were in them before you knew they were there, and, even if you did see them, it meant, unless you didn't mind getting your feet wet, which Carrie Panter *did,* a wild leap across, which was a hardly less irritating alternative. A lady got up to resemble, as closely as possible, a cinema-vampire doesn't look her best jumping a stream, and Carrie Panter didn't like not looking her best even in bed.

She had sneered at Roger as " the youth who goes about with bare legs," but all the same she couldn't help admiring him as he swung along, lithe and supple, in shorts and sweater, his head bare showing golden glints in the brown hair. He seemed like the embodiment of youth and she found herself comparing him to some of the old young men she was accustomed to meet in town and the comparison was all in Roger's favour. It was surprising how many of the men she knew appeared to suffer from varicose veins, but there was no sign of any such thing in his straight sunburnt legs which might have been modelled from those of some Greek statue.

However she managed to reach the fern cave and when it had been inspected she sat herself down on the least knobbly-looking rock she could see before setting out on the rigours of the homeward journey, and Roger squatted on the sand beside her.

" I say, your husband's in Africa, isn't he?" he asked, staring straight out to sea with eyes that saw only the visions of his mind.

" Yes, poor dear," replied Mrs. Panter, forcing a little sigh. " All these miles of water between us," she added, waving her hand vaguely in the direction of North America. " Such a dreadful part where he is. That's why I'm here and he's there."

Once more she indicated the direction of North America with a carefully manicured forefinger.

" I wish I had a chance of getting there," Roger said gloomily.

Mrs. Panter abandoned her rapt contemplation of the ocean rolling, as she fondly imagined, between her and her spouse and gave a hasty glance down at the top of Roger's head which was all she could see of him except the broad shoulders and the pedal end of a pair of mahogany legs encased in white sand shoes.

" Why?" she asked abruptly.

" Oh, I dunno," he said. " I've got to find a job of some

sort when I leave old Peal, and it struck me — I want to get right away. I want to — to try and forget things. It 'ud be easier if one was right away."

"What things?"

He pulled himself up with a little jerk.

"Oh, I dunno. I suppose every one has things they want to forget, haven't they? What's the good of talking though? My only chance would be to work my passage out, and even then there's nothing for me when I get there. It's just a — a sort of dream which comes to nothing, like — like all one's other dreams. It's — it's only a second-best dream at that," he added whimsically.

"I wonder what the very best dream was about?" observed Mrs. Panter with entire truthfulness.

"Oh, I can't tell you that," Roger said quickly. "It's — it's a very private dream."

Mrs. Panter tweaked his hair playfully.

"Very private dreams that can't be told even to a friend are always on one subject," she said sapiently. "You're in love, dear boy."

"You can guess as much as you like but I'm not going to tell you whether you're right or wrong, so you'll only be wasting your time."

She couldn't see his face to note the expression on it but she saw his shoulders give an involuntary twitch of nervousness and she knew she had hit the nail on the head and driven it home. A little smile of triumph flashed on her lips and was gone again in a second.

"What a shame to tease you," she said soothingly. "I was only joking. But about this African project of yours. Why d'you say it's no good talking about it? Why not consult Biddy or that nice Mr. Ffoulkes? I daresay they could help you."

He looked round at her, startled.

"I wouldn't do that for the world," he said in alarmed tones. "Don't say anything to Bid — Mrs. Rycroft. Swear you won't?"

"Not if you don't want me to, of course," she replied, infusing a degree of hesitancy into her voice which did credit to her histrionic powers. The last thing she desired was to tell Biddy, for a plan was formulating in her mind and Biddy might spoil it all if she knew of it. Later on it might be useful to be able to say that Roger had sworn her to secrecy.

"Swear," repeated Roger, deceived by her manner into thinking she contemplated saying something to Biddy.

"All right. I swear," said Carrie Panter, still contriving to create an atmosphere of doubt as to the wisdom of silence.

Roger heaved a sigh of relief.

"Look here," Mrs. Panter said, after a little pause, "if you *really* want a job in Africa, possibly my husband could find one for you. Would you like me to try?"

"I say! Would you really? By Jove! you are a brick."

"Mind I can't promise anything. Don't go counting your chickens. When do you leave this job you're at now?"

"The middle of November. I say, how soon can you write to your husband, do you think?"

"I write every mail," Mrs. Panter said virtuously.

Perhaps Roger had learned wisdom, or possibly, in the excitement of the moment, he forgot that Carrie Panter was a woman. Be that as it may, he certainly did not treat her to any of his heroics about refusing her aid on account of her sex, and when, later on, they parted company, it was understood between them that Mr. Panter was to be approached with a view to finding, if possible, a job for Roger in Africa.

To mail a letter was much too slow a process for Mrs. Panter. The next morning a long cable was dispatched to her husband.

It was not the first time he had been asked by his wife to find jobs for young men whom, for one reason or another, she wanted out of the way. Young men were all very well up to a certain point, but occasionally they showed no inclina-

tion to stop when they reached that point and when that happened they were safest at a distance, and, as a rule, the victims didn't require much persuading to go, for Carrie Panter's interest in them was exhausted only with their resources, so when that moment arrived they were generally only too glad to find an opening provided for them.

Mr. Panter was favourably situated to act as intermediary in these little transactions for the climate of the particular district where he was was not exactly salubrious so that it constantly happened that either the managers of the various rubber plantations round about went sick and died or had to be repatriated, in which case his assistant took his place and a fresh sub-manager had to be appointed, or else the assistant manager himself fell a prey to one of the many diseases which riddled the white population of these parts and a substitute had to be found, and the same thing applied to the managers and clerks in the business houses in Dar-es-Salaam and Lindi, so that a continuous shifting of staffs was always in progress.

Mrs. Panter told Roger what she had done, at the first opportunity.

"I couldn't get an answer before I left here so I told Gavin to reply to London," she told him. "I'll write and let you know the very minute I hear."

"I don't know how to thank you enough," Roger said effusively. "It's simply ripping of you to take all this trouble for me."

"You needn't thank me. I'm only too glad to do it," Mrs. Panter assured him with perfect sincerity. "Besides you've not *got* a job yet."

Three days later Mrs. Panter returned to town and on the same day Biddy and Miss Bellamy also left.

With the inconsistency of human nature Roger felt a little aggrieved that Biddy seemed almost eager to get back to London. Having taken the utmost pains to conceal his feelings with, as he fondly imagined, complete success, he

nevertheless felt irrationally disappointed that she said good-bye so dispassionately. He didn't quite know what he expected, under the circumstances. For all he could tell to the contrary Biddy merely regarded him as a chance acquaintance who must not be allowed to degenerate into a bore. The play had been played out, the curtain had fallen, the lights in the theatre were being lowered, and the audience was departing homewards leaving the poor mummer to strip off his fine raiment, clothe himself in his prosaic work-a-day garments, and slink forgotten and unrecognised into the darkness. That was how it all seemed to him, who knew nothing of the events of that critical evening when he had made his vow to John, with Biddy listening on the little wooden platform above his head where, had he looked up, he might have seen her standing in the moonlight. Perhaps if she had had any glimmering of Roger's plans for the future, immature as those plans were, she would not have parted from him in quite such an offhand manner, a manner which she purposely made to appear as casual and ordinary as possible because she dared not do otherwise.

Biddy, too, had her secret schemes which must be carried out before she could own to having been a deliberate eavesdropper. To betray herself now would be to jeopardise everything, and so anxious was she to seem perfectly natural and at her ease that she went to the opposite extreme and her farewell to Roger was stiff and formal. So stiff and formal was it indeed that, although she invited him to be sure to come to see her as soon as he came back to London, Roger, sore and disappointed, inwardly determined that here and now would be the parting of the ways.

He had intended to tell her of the chance offered him of going out to Africa when it was settled one way or the other, but now the old morbid obstinacy, which had begun to take a lower seat, reasserted itself and he made up his mind, not without some bitterness at the back of it, that Biddy had lost all further interest in him and that, such being the case, he would be damned before he inflicted on

her unwilling ear a recital of his contemptible ambitions.

Miss Bellamy was far more profuse in her expressions of regret at saying good-bye to Roger, but here again the uttered words had no more than a face value. She was actuated by precisely the contrary motives to those employed by Biddy. She was so afraid her adieux might show the relief she felt at getting away without the vague suspicions she had entertained becoming anything more that she bade him farewell with a degree of heartiness that surprisd even herself with the warmth she managed to infuse into it.

Carrie Panter, travelling up to town in the same compartment as Biddy and Miss Bellamy, watched the leave-taking appraisingly. She was not in the least deceived by the former's feigned indifference as Roger was. She had trained herself to make a careful study of details which, to most people, would appear trifling and unimportant but which were often the key to some puzzling situation and she noticed how Biddy, the whole time she was platitudinising to him, was fumbling nervously with the buttons of her glove, fastening and unfastening them until she ended by pulling one off altogether, and she noticed too how, when the train had started, Biddy made no attempt to pick up any of the papers and magazines with which she had provided herself for the journey, but sat upright in her corner of the carriage, gazing out of the window with a rapt smile on her lips, lost in thoughts of some not unpleasant character.

Taking all these things into consideration, Carrie was glad to remember, in spite of her husband being there, that Africa was quite a long way from England. It was a country with immense possibilities for young men in Roger's position and it would be an act of real charity to do all that lay in her power to provide him with an opening in that land of promise.

It was nearly a fortnight before Roger heard from Mrs.

Panter, and he spent the interim in a state of such profound melancholy that even the usually unobservant Mr. Peal remarked the change in him though, being unversed in the ways of sentiment, he put it down to liver and, in a conscientious endeavour to minister to a mind diseased, gave private instructions to Harcourt to introduce, surreptitiously, a pinch of Epsom Salts into Roger's early morning cup of tea.

When Mrs. Panter did write, however, she had satisfactory news to give. She had had no answer to her cable but, as good luck would have it, a certain Mr. Lord, armed with credentials from her husband, had called upon her.

Mr. Lord, it turned out, was the representative in Dar-es-Salaam of a syndicate which had been formed to take over tracts of land in various parts of Tanganyika Territory and develop them. Sisal and rubber growing were its principal activities but it also dabbled in cocoanuts, arrow-root and pineapples, and, in the uplands, went in for raising cattle.

Mrs. Panter had gone out of her way to be gracious to Mr. Lord, and at the crucial moment, after a well thought out little dinner to which she had invited him, when he was feeling at peace with the world in general and Mrs. Panter and himself in particular, she had diplomatically brought the conversation round to likely openings for young men in the line of his business, and had elicited from him the intelligence that he was looking out for somebody for the post of accountant in his office in Dar-es-Salaam and if she had any young fellow she wanted to benefit and who would like the job, her nominee should have preferential treatment. Mrs. Panter had struck while the iron was hot and had mentioned Roger's name and the matter, subject to Roger's consent, was as good as settled.

In consideration of the fact that the syndicate would have to provide his passage money and outfit, Roger must not expect a large salary the first year, and he would have to sign an undertaking to bind himself for three years.

Mr. Lord would be sailing in a month's time and would take Roger back with him, if, after an interview to be arranged immediately, they came to terms. Meanwhile, according to the promise he had extorted from her, she had said nothing to Biddy and she remained, etc.

Roger received this letter with very mixed feelings. Now that the matter was almost clinched, his longing to get right away from any possibility of meeting Biddy was tempered with a sick dread of the prospect of that possibility being turned into an impossibility and he had to force himself to seek out Mr. Peal and get permission from him to go up to London for a couple of nights for the required interview.

Mr. Peal was quite annoyingly congratulatory and gave his consent with a readiness which left Roger no loophole for altering his mind, and also persisted in presenting him with an unnecessarily fulsome testimonial to forward to his prospective employer, couched in such terms of eulogy that it would have been difficult for Mr. Lord to go back on his word even had he wished to do so.

So the interview was arranged, and five days later Roger went up to town and met Mr. Lord at his hotel and that gentleman, scenting a good bargain, came to terms, exceedingly favourable to his syndicate, and almost before he realised what was happening, Roger found himself signing the paper which bound him for three years to his new master, spent a strenuous afternoon being fitted out with tropical kit, and was on his way back to Porth Ros with instructions to meet Mr. Lord without fail on board the *S. S. Cape Noon* sailing from Tilbury on Wednesday, November 29th.

At intervals during the journey he took out his steamer ticket and looked at it with a growing sense of wonder. Like the old woman in the nursery rhyme he felt inclined to say "This is none of I."

Six months ago he had not even known of Biddy's existence and now — now he was running away from her

— deliberately putting the width of two continents between himself and her.

Perhaps his desperate longing for her had never been quite so great as at this moment when he had burnt his boats behind him. He had only to close his eyes to see her as vividly and distinctly as though she actually stood before him and, because he hadn't the courage to meet the vision, he resolutely kept them open staring out of the carriage window at the flying scenery in a fruitless endeavour to forget the past and concentrate solely on the future.

He was still fixed in his determination not to see Biddy again before he sailed; not even to tell her that he was sailing. To behold the reality of that persistent vision would be more than he could bear and yet, if he told her he was leaving, he would in common courtesy and gratitude be bound to call and say good-bye. She would be hurt that he had shut her out of his counsels but better that than to run the risk of losing his self-control and blurting out the truth. He would write her a letter to send back by the pilot. It would be a darned difficult letter to write because, even then, he would have to suppress his feelings while giving her adequate reasons for his strange conduct, but there was nothing else to be done. John, too! John would be thinking him an ungrateful brute, but he'd understand because he'd guess at the reasons and anyhow they'd probably never meet again, so what did it matter?

But all the same, in his heart of hearts, Roger knew that it did matter more than a little to him. In parting from John he was cutting himself adrift from one who had proved himself that thousandth man who "will stand your friend with the whole round world agin you." Never again would he find another to do for him what John had done. Once but once only, there comes into the life of each Jonathan a David who stands alone, apart from all other men as far as he is concerned. His place, once vacant, can never be filled; and Roger, of deliberate intent, was going to make such a vacancy in John's life.

He had no illusions on that score. He didn't attempt to blind himself to facts by throwing dust in his own eyes. He knew, as men *do* know by some peculiar instinct vouchsafed them, that his and John's souls were knit together and that in tearing his soul apart he must inevitably tear John's also and the realisation of what he was doing stung him to the quick but he had no alternative.

In some distant future, when, perhaps, Biddy was safely married to another man (God, how that thought tortured!) he would seek John out again and it would all be as if this interruption to their friendship had never happened.

CHAPTER XXI

When Biddy left Porth Ros on her return to town she was still in a state of uncertainty as to her best method of procedure in the light of what she had learned during those five minutes when she had stood listening to the conversation between Roger and John at the bottom of Morant Steps.

Before that, when she was still ignorant of Roger's feelings towards her, she had no choice except to leave things to shape their own course, but now that she knew beyond any possibility of doubt that he loved her she felt as though some barrier had been removed which, up till then, had stretched across her path, obstructing her further progress.

Now she was free to go on but she still hesitated, debating within herself which way to take of the many that lay before her.

She knew Roger well enough by this time to realise that what he had sworn he would keep to. That stubborn pride of his, that obstinate determination to preserve his independence at whatever cost, was a wall of stone separating them against which she might dash herself in vain in a fruitless endeavour to overthrow it without making the very smallest impression. She would only bruise herself in the effort and, at the end, the wall would still be standing solid and impregnable as ever.

Very well then! The only way of getting to the other side of a wall that resists all one's struggles to dislodge it is to climb it, therefore Biddy cast around for the easiest method of scrambling up one side and dropping down the other, and the first thing she had to do before she could hope to be successful was to lighten herself of all encumbrances, chiefest among which was the wretched money left to her by her late husband.

She felt quite resentful that Colonel Rycroft had left her his entire fortune without any restrictions whatsoever. He could so easily have inserted a clause into his will by which she forfeited it automatically in the event of remarriage. Lots of men did it, and nobody thought any the worse of them except perhaps, in some cases, their widows. It would have saved her such a lot of trouble if only James had made some such proviso.

Both Biddy and her husband had been singularly devoid of relatives of any sort. Biddy had some nebulous second cousins in Australia or New Zealand — she wasn't quite sure which — but she had never heard Colonel Rycroft mention a single living relation. He had once told her that he was an only son, and she, noticing that he said "son" and not "child," had asked if he had ever had any sisters, whereupon he had been seriously and, as she considered, unreasonably put out and read her a homily on the obliquity of prying into other people's affairs which effectually stopped any further curiosity on her part. She vaguely supposed he must have a sister who had died and that the subject was a painful one and there the matter ended.

That if she wanted Roger, she must get rid of the money was certain.

The question was how best to do so.

Belle, of course, must be provided for out of it, and the remainder she would have to divide among deserving charities.

She had five hundred a year of her very own which she would keep. Roger surely couldn't object to that when it was brought to his knowledge that, for his sake, she had given up so much.

Not that she grudged giving it up. She had counted the cost and found it well worth the price demanded. It was rather exciting to buy happiness in the open market like this. The chance came to so few people! She would go and consult young Mr. Viney when she got back to London. Young Mr. Viney, sometimes addressed by the older clerks

who had served under his father as "Mr. Edwyn," was the senior partner in the firm of Viney, Hammett and Pearce, Solicitors. He was a rotund little man with a cheerful red face and a bald head and, although on the wrong side of sixty, owed the qualifying epithet to the fact that his father was still alive.

Viney, Hammett and Pearce had been the solicitors for the Rycroft family for the last sixty years and managed all Biddy's affairs for her.

Young Mr. Viney would be very upset at her decision, no doubt. She must be prepared to face his displeasure and confute all the arguments and legal quibbles he would bring to bear to turn her from her purpose, but she didn't care a button about that. She had made up her mind and nothing would make her alter it.

That was her fixed determination when she left Porth Ros, but before she had time to pay her threatened visit to her solicitors she stumbled upon a discovery that caused her to alter, not her mind, but the disposition of the money in question.

It was on a Saturday that she returned home and on the Sunday she went into the library, a dismal little room at the back of the house which had been where her husband had been accustomed to withdraw himself when he wanted to be alone and undisturbed, and it was here he expected her to report herself on her arrival from any function she had attended or even any walk she had taken unaccompanied by him.

To this room the distraught cook was summoned when the joint was underdone or overdone as the case might be, to hear her master's candid opinion of her incapabilities, and from this room she issued in tears of impotent wrath, to give a month's warning to her mistress.

Biddy hated the room and all its associations and rarely entered it, but on this occasion she wanted to look up something in a book of reference which was in there, and went in for that reason. Most of the available floor space

was taken up by a large knee-hole writing table standing in the middle of the room, its leather-covered surface left bare and empty with none of the customary appurtenances of its kind to hide its nakedness. There was no litter of papers, no inkstand or pen-tray, nothing to show it had ever been used, and its abandoned appearance gave the key-note to the whole room.

But on this particular afternoon, when Biddy entered the library, she at once noticed a box standing in the center of this table which had never been there before. It was an old-fashioned box of morocco with brass corners and her husband's initials, J. R., stamped in old lettering on the top.

To the best of her recollections she had never set eyes on it before and she had no idea where it could have come from. She rang the bell and, after a few minutes' delay, it was answered by a housemaid.

"Do you know anything about this, Eileen?" she enquired, indicating the box.

"We found it on the top of the bookshelf while you were away, Mum," the girl answered. "We were doing out the room, Mum, and there it was. I thought perhaps as you didn't know it was there, so I fetched it down and put it on the table, meaning to tell you about it when you came back, only it slipped my memory. I hope I didn't do wrong, Mum?"

"No, it was quite right, Eileen, thank you. That was all," Biddy said and the maid withdrew.

When she was gone Biddy picked up the box and examined it curiously, wondering what it contained. The key was missing and the box locked, but she fetched a lever and, after a little struggle, managed to pry the lid open.

Inside were a photograph and a bundle of letters tied up with red tape.

The photograph was that of a girl, dressed in the fashion of the middle of the eighteen sixties, and on the back was written in an Italian hand, "Elizabeth Rycroft, aged 18, 1866."

Elizabeth Rycroft! Who on earth was Elizabeth Rycroft? Biddy had never heard of such a person. She knew it could not be her mother-in-law, for one thing because that lady had died in 1860, six years before the photograph was taken, and, for another, because her name had not been Elizabeth but Jean. Perhaps the letters would give some clue.

She untied the packet.

There were about twenty envelopes in it, all directed in the same handwriting to Francis Rycroft, Esqre, followed by an address which Biddy recognised as that of the house where her father-in-law had lived.

She took out the first enclosure. It was a rather stilted schoolgirl epistle, beginning " My dear Father," and ending up " Your affectionate daughter, Elizabeth Rycroft," and contained nothing but the description of the dull routine of school life. There were some nine or ten of these, then a few, evidently written while the writer was staying away on visits, presumably having left school, and finally, at the bottom of the bundle, four letters which made Biddy shed tears of sympathy for the author of them, for they were pathetic little appeals to be allowed to marry the man of her choice, appeals which were evidently paid no attention to or ignored for each grew more piteous and entreating than the one before.

The last of all was a mere almost illegible scrawl. No beginning " My dear Father," in this one; no ending " Your affectionate daughter." It plunged right into the matter in hand without any softening preliminaries.

" I have gone away with James Graindorge. By the time you get this I shall be married to him. You are cruel. Elizabeth."

That was all it contained, but the few words told Biddy all she wanted to know.

The girl in the photograph was her sister-in-law, her husband's sister, and because she had followed the dictates of her heart, she had been cast off by her family. That was

why her husband had been so angry when she had asked him whether he had ever had a sister. It was explained now.

Poor Elizabeth, who had gone away with James Graindorge!

Why did the name seem familiar to her? She was positive she had come across it somewhere lately.

Suddenly it flashed across her mind. That funny woman she had talked to on the rocks at Porth Ros. "Graindorge, the French for Barleycorn, you know, only so much more distingué I always think."

She had told Biddy some involved story about her mother-in-law having married against her people's wishes and having, thereby, lost her share of her father's money.

"My father-in-law's name was James, but as he's dead it doesn't matter."

Biddy remembered that because she had remarked that it was the same name as Colonel Rycroft.

But if that were so, the funny woman's husband was the son of this girl in the photograph, her husband's sister, and the funny woman herself was Biddy's niece by marriage!

The realisation of this was too much for Biddy. She sat down in the nearest chair and laughed till she cried as she pictured the faces of her friends as she introduced her to them.

"You haven't met my niece, Mrs. Graindorge (the French for barleycorn, you know)."

But with the realisation came another which stopped her laughter in the air, as it were.

Here, straight from heaven, was the solution of the disposal of the Rycroft money. It was not an act of charity. It was their money which she would simply be handing back to the rightful owners. Biddy heaved a great sigh of relief. Now it was all plain sailing. She could go to "young" Mr. Viney with her plan cut and dried, and although he might, and doubtless would, protest, she would now have

a certain amount of justice to bolster up her scheme. At the worst she could be accused of nothing more than an act of quixotism, and if he started quoting her husband's wishes, she would snap her fingers in his face.

She went off the next morning without a word to Belle, to her interview, having taken the precaution to make an appointment by telephone with Mr. Viney.

The senior partner received her in his private office with the bland smile he reserved for his more influential clients, a smile which, as Biddy proceeded to unfold her project, gradually became more and more strained and unnatural, until it finally vanished altogether.

When she had finished there was a long pause during which Mr. Viney, metaphorically winded, could only sit staring at her with large round eyes of petrified amazement, as though she were some horrific exhibition in a dime museum.

"But, my dear lady," he expostulated when he had recovered his breath sufficiently to speak. "Have you considered? Your late husband left this money to *you* — "

"Then it's mine to do what I like with, isn't it?" Biddy observed calmly.

"In a sense, yes," agreed Mr. Viney, unwillingly. "But one must take the wishes of the — er — deceased into account. I'm sure you would not desire to act in any way contrary to your husband's — er — intentions."

"What were his intentions?" Biddy demanded.

"To — er — provide for you," replied Mr. Viney uncomfortably.

Biddy nodded her head.

"I'm provided for all right," she assured the harassed lawyer confidently. "You needn't have any worry on that score."

"This — er — Graindorge, now. What proof have you that she is not an imposter?" Mr. Viney wanted to know, changing his tactics which, up to now, didn't appear to be meeting with any success.

"I suppose you'll next be suggesting that the poor creature forged the letters I found and put them in that box," Biddy said sarcastically. "You can't explain them away however hard you try."

"People are very clever nowadays," Mr. Viney remarked, pessimistically shaking his head.

"Well, this person wasn't. She was a perfect fool, poor dear," declared Biddy. "Look here, Mr. Viney, if you aren't going to carry this business through for me please say so and have done with it, and I'll go to somebody else, but if you are, don't let us waste time suspecting Mrs. Graindorge of hatching impossible plots to do me out of my money, because I can assure you she hasn't got the brains to do it. I'm off to Putney to see my niece now. If you like you can put on your hat and come with me."

"It's all very disturbing, very unusual," observed Mr. Viney quaveringly. "I really hardly know what to say. Of course, Mrs. Rycroft, I don't want you to fall into unscrupulous hands. Our firm has had the interests of your husband's family at heart for such a great number of years. Pray don't act hastily in this most important matter. You might regret your impulsive decision when it was too late to retract."

"Why should I?" asked Biddy judicially.

Mr. Viney's red face got a shade redder.

"Well, you — you might want to — er — marry again. You're — you're still young, Mrs. Rycroft," he said nervously.

"So you think I ought to wait for some one who will overlook my defects in consideration of my money! That's not very complimentary to me, Mr. Viney."

"I meant nothing of the sort," almost screamed the badgered little man in an agony.

"Well, that's what it sounded like," said Biddy imperturbably. "So you won't come and inspect my new-found relatives? Now, once and for all, are you going to see this job through for me or aren't you? I mean to do it, so your

refusal won't make an atom of difference in the long run."

"You leave me very little choice," said Mr. Viney ruefully. "I'll strike a bargain with you. If you'll let me make inquiries and find out that this Mrs.— What's-her-name — is the person you think she must be before we go any further, I'll act for you. I'm bound to guard against imposture. It's a — a sacred duty."

"If you'd only *seen* her!" Biddy murmured. "All right. I'm willing to agree to that, but I'm going down to Putney now."

"Pray don't commit yourself," Mr. Viney besought her anxiously.

"You couldn't commit yourself with dear Edie if you tried ever so hard," Biddy informed him.

"Where to, Ma'am?" enquired Rands when Biddy was in the car.

"Gracious! I've forgotten the address. I know it's Putney, and I know the number's thirteen, because she hoped I wouldn't be frightened away by it, but beyond that I've no more idea than the man in the moon."

"We might ask at the post office, Ma'am," suggested Rands helpfully. "What's the name of the person you're wanting to find?"

Anybody who lived outside the three mile radius was, to Rands, a person.

"Graindorge," Biddy told him.

"Beg pardon, Ma'am?"

"The French for barleycorn, Rands."

"P'raps it 'ud be better if you was to tell me when we get to the post office, Ma'am," Rands said respectfully. "To the best of my recollection we didn't 'ave such things when I was in France."

"I'm sure you didn't," Biddy said twinkling. "The one I met was British to the — the kernel. All right. Drive to the post office in Putney High Street."

"British to the colonel," the mystified Rands muttered to

himself, as he started the car. "I never 'eard of any such things when I was in the army. Kind of a aid-der-conk, I reckon."

All down the King's Road, Biddy examined the passing busses with an interest she had never displayed in these vehicles before. Ere long, she supposed, an omnibus would be her chief means of getting about, and she felt quite a thrill of sympathy for a stout lady she espied climbing laboriously into one with her arms full of parcels. Perhaps some day she would be thus hauled unceremoniously on to the step by an impatient conductor who had no time to waste in politeness, her rapid progress impeded by the results of the morning's household shopping.

When the car drew up at the post office Biddy got out. She thought it would probably be quicker to enquire herself than to leave it to Rands. She was certain he would never master the name, after his perplexity at the mere mention of it.

She found what she wanted without any trouble in a local directory. Jerram Mansions were not more than three minutes run from the High Street. There was no lift and No. 13 was on the fourth floor which entailed toiling up eight flights of stone stairs.

"I won't have a top flat anyhow," she thought to herself, as she panted her way up. "I'd almost rather live in a row."

No. 13 was at the front of the building. The door which gave admittance to it had panels of ground glass through which gleamed curtains of vivid rose pink.

Biddy rang the bell and it appeared to have the same result on the inhabitants of the flat as the prince's kiss on the lips of the sleeping beauty had on the courtiers in the palace in the wood. Where a moment before there had been absolute silence pandemonium arose. Doors banged, voices shouted excitedly to one another, and a small dog started yapping in a shrill querulous falsetto. And predominant among all the other noises could be distinguished one voice

which, once having begun, went on without intermission as if it had been wound up and could only stop when the machinery ran down.

"There's the front door bell," it said. "Helen, Edith, there's the front door bell. Where are you, Helen? Changing your blouse? Well, be quick, dear, and answer the door. No, Edith can't go. She's cooking the dinner and she can't leave the pudding. I'd go only I'm bathing Conrad Grenville, and he's all soapy, and if I take my eye off him for a second he'll be out of his tub and rolling on the drawing room carpet. I wonder who it can be. Perhaps it's Mrs. Goad. She said she'd call round sometime with that pattern for knickers. Or it may be the gas-meter. Edith, Edith, did your father leave any money for the gas bill? Oh, dear. I meant to have reminded him, because it does save such a lot of trouble to give it to the gas-meter when he comes to measure. Helen, aren't you ready yet? Sewing a button on? Good gracious, child, you're as bad as King What's-his-name who played the fiddle when Rome was burning. So unpractical at a time like that, I always thought. My dear mother, your grandmother of course, always declared that want of method was the thief of time, like that other thing, I forget it's name for the moment, but it begins with a P, that Shakespeare invented. Wasn't it Shakespeare? Well, somebody like him then. Now that'll worry me all day. Stay still, Conrad. You shall have a biscuit when I've dried you. Oh, there you are, Helen. Just wait half a minute till I shut the bathroom door."

There was the sound of a door being violently banged and then, after a slight pause, the door, at which Biddy stood patiently waiting till either the button, the pudding or Conrad Grenville could be left while someone dashed out to admit her, was opened and she found herself face to face with a tall slim girl who looked rather astonished at seeing a stranger.

"Yes?" the girl said, in somewhat dubious tones, as though she thought there must be some mistake and that

Biddy could not possibly want to see any of the occupants of the flat.

"It's all right," Biddy couldn't resist saying, "I haven't called for a subscription. I wonder if I could see your mother? I know she's busy bathing Conrad Grenville, whoever Conrad Grenville may be — I couldn't help overhearing that — but if she could leave him without endangering the drawing room carpet, I'd be so glad. You're Helen Graindorge, aren't you?"

"Yes, I'm Helen Graindorge."

The girl evidently would have liked to say, "Who are you who make so free with my name?" but she restrained the impulse, and, instead, invited Biddy in.

The noise of splashing from behind the closed door of the bathroom, or what Biddy inferred was the bathroom, indicated that the cleaning of the mysterious Conrad Grenville was still in process.

"I'm frightfully sorry to seem impertinent, but *who* is Conrad Grenville and why does he choose the moment when he is soapy — if it comes to that, why does he choose *any* moment to — to roll on the drawing room carpet?" Biddy could not refrain from asking, as Helen Graindorge ushered her into a small overcrowded sitting room.

For the first time the girl regarded Biddy with interest and allowed herself to smile.

"He's the dog," she explained. "We called him Conrad Grenville after the name of the man who gave him to us because they're so like one another. Did you think we kept a mentally afflicted boarder?" she glanced round the room as she spoke with disdain. "It's all we can do to squeeze in here ourselves when we're all at home. I'll tell Mother you're here, though I expect she knows it. There isn't much chance of not knowing things in this flat. What name shall I say?"

Biddy considered. She was sorely tempted to send a message to Mrs. Graindorge to tell her Aunt Bridget had called to see her, but she resisted manfully. For all she knew

her niece by marriage might suffer from a weak heart.

"Will you tell her the lady she met at Porth Ros," she said instead. The girl went out and the next minute Biddy heard Mrs. Graindorge exclaiming.

"But how *kind*. Just dry Conrad, dear, while I go and wash my hands and tidy my hair. You don't happen to know what I did with that packet of hairpins I bought on Saturday, do you? They may be on the dresser in the kitchen. No. I remember. How awkward! I put them in a vase on the drawing room mantelpiece so as to have them handy. Well I must just manage without them, that's all. How nice it must be to have a maid to take all these little worries off one's shoulders, but I might as well wish for the moon. Not that I ever *should* wish for such a ridiculous thing, for I really shouldn't know what on earth to do with it, if I had it. My dear mother, who of course was your grandmother, had a rhyme she used to quote to us when we were children, 'If wishes were horses beggars would ride; if watches were turnips'—" here a door was shut between Biddy and the voice and the rest was lost in a confused murmur.

Biddy looked round the room while she was waiting. It was filled to overflowing with gimcrack furniture chosen, apparently, more with an eye to its cheapness than its durability. There was a plethora of photographs, mostly of the Graindorge family at various periods of their career, all inscribed with footnotes, as it were, stating the name and age of the original at the time each was taken, and occasionally, the place where the enormity was perpetrated.

"Willie. Aged 6 years." (It read like an obituary notice, Biddy reflected.) "Fred, August 12, 1914. Bournmouth. 8th day of the war." "Helen and Edith, with Grandpapa." (That must be James Graindorge.) "Father and the children. The Zoo." (This one was open to misconception, but Biddy imagined it must have been taken to commemorate a visit to the Zoological Gardens.)

"Josh, as a baby." Considering Josh was in long clothes, it seemed hardly necessary to emphasise the fact.

But what chiefly interested Biddy was to see, in the place of honour on the mantelpiece, a duplicate of the photograph she had found in the box. If she had had any last flickerings of doubt the sight of this dispelled it.

Even this had its descriptive footnote.

"A mother's love — how sweet the name!
What is a mother's love?
— A noble, pure and tender flame,
Enkindled from above."

Since the late Mrs. Graindorge had died at the birth of her one and only child, it seemed a little out of place to illumine her memory with a flame that, owing to lack of opportunity, had never had the chance of *being* enkindled from above but Biddy supposed it gave some melancholy satisfaction to her son, or, what was more likely, to her daughter-in-law, to wallow in sentiment.

At this point in her meditations Mrs. Graindorge came in, her rosy face exuding pleasure at every pore.

"How *kind,* dear Mrs. — er — " she paused uncertainly. "It's very stupid of me, but do you know I cannot, for the moment, recall your name."

"You couldn't, you know," Biddy reminded her. "You never heard it."

A look of relief passed over Mrs. Graindorge's countenance.

"That would account for it then, wouldn't it?" she observed, in tones of the utmost satisfaction. "How *kind* of you to call."

"I must apologise for the unorthodox hour," Biddy said. "But I think when I tell you the reason of my coming you will excuse it."

"So friendly to come in the morning," remarked her hostess. "If I'd known you were coming I'd have put off bathing dear little Conrad until tomorrow. He ought by rights to have had his bath on Saturday, but what with one

thing and another it got overlooked, and of course yesterday being Sunday was a *dies non.* How useful those foreign expressions are, aren't they — at least I suppose one can call a dead language foreign. They seem to convey one's meaning in a nutshell, don't they? It would have taken me quite a long time in English. All about going to church and the Sunday joint to cook, and one's best dress and so on. My girls take a Sunday school class. So *good* of them, don't you think? Girls nowadays are so apt to care for nothing but frivolities. No chaperones and a dancing partner! When I was young one was talked about if one danced twice running with the same gentleman, and *three* times was as good as a proposal of marriage. That dreadful war upset things so, didn't it? A girl met a man one day and found herself married to him the next and a widow the day after. People talk of marriage being a lottery, but I'm sure in those days it was nothing more or less than a catch-as-catch-can. I'm more thankful than I can say that my girls — "

"My name is Rycroft," Biddy interrupted desperately.

Mrs. Graindorge beamed at her complacently.

"Now what a curious coincidence," she exclaimed briskly. "My husband's mother's maiden name was Rycroft. Wouldn't it be strange if we turned out to be relations? I told you all about her, didn't I? Of course her people cast her off when she ran away with my father-in-law. She ought, by rights, to have come in for quite a lot of money when her father died, but he never forgave her and every penny went to the brother. I must say that I did have a sneaking hope that when *he* died four years ago he would have let bygones be bygones and left poor Jack *something* but I'm not certain if he even knew of his existence. He was quite a distinguished man in his way, Colonel Rycroft, the V. C., you know. I daresay you've heard of him?"

"Yes, I have," Biddy replied without any further beating about the bush. "He was my husband. That's why I've come to see you today."

"I beg your pardon?"

Mrs. Graindorge's eyes were almost starting out of her head with astonishment and alarm. She had come to the conclusion that her visitor was a dangerous lunatic and she was striving hard to recollect the best way to treat anybody thus afflicted. She knew they mustn't be contradicted but beyond that her mind was a blank.

"I'm not mad," Biddy reassured her, reading her thoughts. "It's perfectly true what I'm telling you. Colonel Rycroft was my husband."

"But — but he was my husband's uncle," bleated Mrs. Graindorge feebly, making the statement as though it disposed of Biddy's claims once and for all.

Biddy dimpled.

"Yes, and therefore I'm your husband's aunt — by marriage."

"Aunt by marriage?"

Mrs. Graindorge echoed the words in the listless tones of one in an hypnotic trance, staring at Biddy spellbound.

"I — I can't believe it," she said at last, brushing the back of her hand across her eyes as if to brush away some optical delusion.

"Neither can I. All the same it's an indisputable fact," Biddy said resolutely. "I haven't got my marriage lines with me, but I've got this."

She produced the photograph out of her bag and thrust it into Mrs. Graindorge's nerveless fingers.

Mrs. Graindorge gazed at it in silent amazement then, from it, to its counterpart on the mantelpiece, while Biddy explained how she had lighted on it.

"I'll call Helen and Edith," she said at last, heavily. It was obvious she felt unequal to coping with the situation unaided.

"No. Don't do that. I've something I want to tell you first."

Mrs. Graindorge, who had half risen from her chair, sank back again into it.

"Aunt by marriage," she repeated once more.

This fact appeared to impress her more than any other. If Biddy had been an elderly woman, or even a woman of her own age, she could have brought herself to believe the news that had just been imparted to her, but to be asked to credit the statement that this girl sitting opposite to her was her husband's aunt by marriage was too much for her powers of assimilation.

"Pull yourself together, Edith," said Biddy sharply.

Thus adjured, Mrs. Graindorge, stimulated by the unauthorised use of her christian name, did as she was told and, with a distinct effort, pulled herself together.

Biddy had determined that the only way to make any impression on her new relation was to give her the plain unvarnished truth and keep nothing back. She must throw reticence to the winds and expose her innermost secrets. She hated having to do it, but there was no alternative. Unless it were hammered into her brain with swift incisive strokes, Mrs. Graindorge would never be made to understand the vital necessity of keeping back *none* of the price.

Biddy saw that she was one of those warm-hearted, impulsive creatures who would raise a storm of protest at the idea of benefiting at somebody else's expense, therefore it was essential that it should be well rubbed in that any benefit would consist in her, or rather *Mr.* Graindorge, accepting the total amount of the Rycroft money which was at present in Biddy's possession. The sole condition that Biddy intended to make was that an annual sum of two hundred and fifty pounds should be set aside for the use of Miss Bellamy, out of the income. All the rest was to go to her husband's nephew.

It was not an easy matter to tell her story, Biddy found. She shrank from entering into all the necessary details with this woman whom she hardly knew but it had to be done, so she nerved herself to her task and plunged into the recital of her meeting with Roger, the close companionship into which they were thrown together at Porth Ros, her

realisation that her feelings towards him were gradually undergoing a change and that friendship was deepening into love, the unsuccessful efforts she made to deceive herself, the part she played to deceive the outside world and Roger above all, and, finally, the conversation she had overheard between him and John when he had sworn, in spite of his confession of loving her, never to marry her as long as she had one single penny of Colonel Rycroft's money.

"So you see," she ended wistfully, "if your husband won't take it — and after all he has more right to it than I — I shall have to get rid of it some other way. I'm buying my happiness with it, and if he won't sell it to me, why, I must go elsewhere."

It spoke volumes for the interest Biddy's narrative evoked in Mrs. Graindorge that not once, while it was in progress, did she attempt to utter a word. It was only when Biddy ceased speaking that she opened her mouth.

"My dear," she said then, wiping the tears from her eyes. "It's for all the world like a fairy story. When you come to consider what a number of rocks there are scattered about promiscuously at the seaside it seems as if it must have been ordained that I should choose that particular one. I'm sure at the time I never thought anything except that it looked nice and flat and comfortable to sit on, and yet there I was obeying the dictates of Providence without knowing it. That just shows you how true it is that 'God works in a mysterious way His wonders to perform,' for it was nothing but some dirty orange peel lying about that prevented me settling myself on a rock higher up. I've a perfect horror of orange peel, haven't you? I had an uncle once who slipped on a piece and broke his ankle, at least if it wasn't orange peel it was a banana skin, but anyhow, whichever it was, he broke his ankle. The principle's the same, isn't it? After all, we're told in the Bible to be careful what we call common or unclean, though I'm sure I should never have connected that text with orange peel before this happened for if there's one thing more than

another that I consider common and unclean it is remnants of food lying about. It attracts flies so, doesn't it? Talking of flies, do you know anything about the Royal Air Force? Fred is simply mad about aeroplanes and all that kind of thing. Perhaps now he would be able to work for a commission in it. It was out of the question before, of course. Personally I think they're dreadful things. In a motor car you *are* on the ground if anything goes wrong. Well, so you are in an aeroplane too *eventually* of course, but you know what I *mean*. You're there sooner. But, my dear, I really don't know what to say about this money. Of course I can't help feeling that Jack *has* a right to *some* of it, but it seems too dreadful to take it all. I don't think Jack will approve of that."

"He's got to," Biddy said decidedly. "I've told you already that if he won't take it I shall have to get rid of it in some other way."

"Well, dear — by the way, what *is* your name? Biddy? You won't expect me to call you Aunt Biddy, will you? I mean it would be really too absurd considering you're so much younger than me, but if I may call you Biddy? Well, dear Biddy, the best thing would be for you to see Jack and discuss it with him. I should probably only make a muddle of it, for I'm so excited I hardly know whether I'm on my head or my heels. I shan't say anything to the children until it's quite settled, for they would be making all sorts of plans and it would be such a disappointment if it all came to nothing. You *do* think it will be all right, don't you? It's been such a struggle and one longs to be able to give one's children the very best. Oh! I never thought! Have you any children? Because if so of course we couldn't dream of allowing you to do this."

Biddy reassured her on this point, and Mrs. Graindorge heaved a sigh of relief.

"*That's* a good thing," she said. "At least I don't exactly mean that. Oh, dear! If the mere idea of money makes me as selfish as that, whatever shall I be like if we really get it!

I do hope it's not true what people say — that money alters a person's character and makes them horrid. But I'm sure it can't be, because if it was *you* wouldn't be so sweet and kind. Are you really going? Won't you stay to lunch? It's only hashed mutton and a fig pudding."

"No. I really must go," Biddy, who had risen in the middle of this speech, said. "Could Mr. Graindorge come and see me this evening do you think?"

"Oh, I'm sure he could, but however I'm going to explain to him I can't conceive," said Mrs. Graindorge agitatedly. "What on earth can I tell him?"

"Once more the dimples appeared in Biddy's cheeks.

"Tell him his rich aunt from whom he has expectations has sent for him," she said. "Good-bye, Edith, and I think you may safely make plans."

Mr. Graindorge accordingly paid a visit to Biddy that evening. She had cancelled an engagement to join a theatre party on purpose not to miss him if he called.

Miss Bellamy, luckily, had gone to see a married niece who lived out at Willesden and would not be back that night, so there was no need for explanations at present. They could come later when Biddy had settled up things.

Mr. Graindorge was a tall harassed individual who looked as if life had dealt hardly with him.

His wife had given him an incoherent account of the morning's interview, so he was more or less prepared for what Biddy told him.

"I really hardly know what to say, Mrs. Rycroft," he said in worried tones, when she had unfolded her plan. "It seems like taking advantage of an impulsive act of generosity on your part. One can't accept a large sum of money from anybody (I am assuming it is a large sum), as if one was picking up sixpence lying in the gutter. I must say I have grave doubts as to the wisdom of your proposal."

"Even after the reasons I have given?" Biddy said. "Look here, Mr. Graindorge, if I'd been happy with your

uncle, it might have been different, but I wasn't happy. Now I've the chance of being happy, haven't I the right to take it? Am I to forego it because of this wretched money? It belongs to you much more than to me, but I tell you frankly that if you refuse it I shall still get rid of it, so you needn't think you're going to stop me by doing so. Surely it's better that your grandfather's fortune should benefit you and your children than any charity?"

Mr. Graindorge eyed her gravely for a minute.

"Supposing things didn't pan out as you've arranged that they should?" he said at length. "What would you feel like if you lost your money and got nothing in return?"

"I'm not afraid," she replied confidently. "I'm not afraid because I *know*, you see. If I wasn't positive, I wouldn't do it. Don't you see, don't you *see?* Because I *know*, I can go to Roger directly this barrier is removed and tell him I know. Oh, do be sensible about it and help me."

It took Biddy a long time to wring a half-grudging assent from Mr. Graindorge, but at last when he realised she was determined he gave way.

"But mind, it's only on condition that if things don't go right you take this money back. Is that understood?"

"That's an easy condition. I don't mind agreeing to that," Biddy said confidently. "Thank you — Jack."

CHAPTER XXII

"And that's the end," said Mr. Peal, a little wistfully.

"That's the end," echoed Roger. "I'm glad it's finished before I go."

"This day week you sail?"

Roger nodded.

"Yes. This day week," he said. "I've — I've loved being here, Sir. You've been awfully decent to me. I'm afraid you must have found me a most awful duffer."

Mr. Peal and Roger were sitting at the table in the "Aquarium," and the former had just dictated the last sentence which brought to an end the great work on Molluscs which was to demonstrate to a hitherto callous world the lovable nature of a mussel and how the limpet had, up to this, suffered from a want of appreciation on the part of the outside world, due to ignorance and a certain apathy which prevented the general public from studying the habits of that engaging little creature.

Roger had laughed with Biddy many a time over the seriousness with which Mr. Peal treated the subject, but there was a curious sort of regret at the thought that his work had finished.

It marked the close to yet another chapter in the book of his life, and the one he was about to begin was full of all kinds of unknown things. He felt like someone who, poised ready to dive into the deep water, hesitates wondering whether the water will be cold or not.

"You've been of the greatest possible assistance to me," Mr. Peal said, in his pedantic manner. "Added to which your companionship has been an unalloyed pleasure to me. One loses touch with youth so easily. It is good to be reminded of it sometimes. I shall miss you when you go on Monday. The house will seem strangely quiet and dull. I fear you must have found it so yourself at times."

"I've been awfully happy, Sir," Roger said with perfect truthfulness. "I have, honestly. You see, before I came to you I had rather a rotten time of it, and to come here was — was like getting into bed when you're tired out. I revelled in the peace and quiet of it all.

"Shall you think it very impertinent on my part, if I ask you a question?" enquired Mr. Peal diffidently.

"Of course I shan't. Fire away, Sir."

"It's rather a — a leading one," said Mr. Peal anxiously.

"Well, I reserve to myself the right to answer it or not as I think fit. What is it?"

"Why didn't you want anyone to know you had signed on for this job abroad? Why did you ask me to tell nobody, especially John?"

Roger shifted uncomfortably in his seat.

"I don't want them to know till I've actually gone," he said doggedly.

"But why?" persisted Mr. Peal. "If you'll forgive my saying so, it seems a little arbitrary, doesn't it? I should have thought that John, above all people, might have been taken into your confidence."

"I didn't want John to know because—Oh, well, I dunno. I hate good-byes. If I told John, other people 'ud be almost bound to find out," Roger explained awkwardly.

"Other people? But you told me that, except for John and Mrs. Rycroft, you had no friends. If that's so — Oh!" A sudden light dawned upon Mr. Peal. So then, it was Mrs. Rycroft the boy was running away from! He got up from where he sat and trotting round the table put his hand on Roger's shoulder.

"I have been young and now am old," he said. "So it's like that, is it? Tch, tch, tch."

"Yes. It's like that, Sir," Roger said, biting his lips to keep back the emotion which threatened to get the better of him. "Unlike my prototype, however, I'm not desiring to be fed with the crumbs that fall from the rich man's table."

"So you're running away."

"Yes, if you choose to put it that way."

Mr. Peal took his hand off Roger's shoulder and pulling up a chair sat down beside him.

"I want you to be patient and listen to me for a few minutes," he said. "I'm an old man, at any rate old compared to you. Did you ever hear that I had been married?"

Roger nodded assent.

"I was twenty-seven when I married — a year older than you are now. I suppose I was always a dry-as-dust individual, even when I was young, but that didn't prevent my loving Drina, my wife, as passionately as anybody else of my age could have done, and she, God bless her, for some extraordinary reason which I've never been able to understand, loved me. I don't think two people could have been happier than we were, and when she told me of — of her hopes, the cup seemed overflowing. Evening after evening we spent, planning and discussing and building up castles in the air. It was all so wonderful and splendid and *certain*. We neither of us gave a thought to any possible danger, or, if we did, we each of us kept it from the other. Nothing *could* go wrong. Fate couldn't be so unkind. But, my dear, Fate was unkind. My son was born on December the sixteenth. On January the seventh my wife died, and two days later her baby followed her. There was a big storm that night, I remember, and I sat listening to the wind beating against the windows, and every now and then I'd start up to go and see if they were all right, forgetting — my God, actually forgetting that they were beyond the reach of anything that could hurt them. Thirty-seven years ago next January, and ever since then, I've been lonely, and yet, in a way, not lonely, for I've always had a curious fancy that they're not far away. I used to sit in the bare empty drawing room where we'd sat together, and I'd talk with her about our son, and we watched him together grow from a baby into a boy, from a boy into a youth and then into

a young man. Together, we went through all the dear delights that other parents do. The servants, I think, fancied my grief had turned my brain, when they heard me talking to myself in the evenings, but, in reality, I was keeping myself sane. I used to picture it all so vividly to myself that it all seemed as if it was actually happening. My boy was something more to me than a mere fantasy. I could describe every detail of his appearance, each inflection of his voice. I built up a real living personality, so real and so living that it filled the emptiness of my existence. I daresay all this sounds like the maggot of a disordered brain and perhaps it was, but it made life, if not happy, at least endurable, and I deliberately cultivated the illusion that my two dear ghosts crept back in the silence of the long evenings, as I sat by myself, and bore me company. Roger, my dear, if my boy had lived, he would have come to me in all his troubles and perplexities, because we should have been such friends. Couldn't you, don't you think, tell me all about *your* troubles and perplexities? Perhaps I could help you."

"You're most awfully good, Sir. But there's nothing that can be helped," Roger said. "It's just the general cussedness of things. I ought to have run away long before this, only, you see, I'd nowhere to run to, and I'm afraid I wasn't very anxious to run. I kept putting off the evil day but now I have the chance to — to get away from things I've got to take it, only I — well, I suppose I'm a coward, but I daren't risk saying good-bye. I — I daren't do anything that might weaken my resolution. I've the courage of my convictions only so long as I'm not called upon to defend them. If I started upon explanations I should only get involved and blurt out the very things I'm trying to hide. It's far better I should do what I'm doing and slink off without a word to anybody beforehand, than give myself away. Thank you for telling me what you have, Sir. I shall miss you too. Perhaps — if ever I come back — you'll let me come and see you. This has been the nearest

approach to a home I've had since my father died. I shall often think of it out there."

"Think of it as if it *were* your home," Mr. Peal said. "Perhaps if you did, it would make things seem a little less lonely for you.

Nothing more was said between them, but on the following Monday when Roger left, Mr. Peal, as he said good-bye to him, repeated the offer.

"I'd like to feel you were thinking of this as your home," he remarked again. "Come back to me, Roger, when your three years of Africa are finished."

"If I come back at all, I will," Roger promised him. "But I shall never come back," he added within himself forlornly.

Roger had elected to leave Porth Ros on the Monday the day but one before his ship sailed, because a sudden whim had seized him to go down to Harwood on the Tuesday and have a last look round at all the old familiar haunts of his childish days.

He had quite made up his mind that it would be years before he saw his native country again, if indeed he ever did, and he wanted to carry away with him into exile a fresh memory of the scenes he had once loved. He also had a kind of idea that they would interpose themselves between the new life of exile and those six months during which he had begun dimly to comprehend that all that had been before had been nothing but the preface to life itself.

It was seven o'clock when the train reached Paddington. He had booked a room at the Liverpool Street Hotel for two nights and as his taxi glided noiselessly and swiftly along the Marylebone Road he looked about him curiously.

The street lamps were ablaze with light and they reminded him of those not far distant days when he had wandered aimlessly beneath them with no object in view, no purpose to be fulfilled, no goal to be reached at the end of the journey. He shivered slightly at the recollection. It seemed almost impossible to realise that he could be the

same person as the ragged unkempt vagabond of six months ago.

He glanced down at the neat blue serge suit he had on and wondered whether, if he were to meet one of his Embankment acquaintances, he would be recognised. "A bleeding toff!" That would be how he would be described now by such an one.

Arrived at the hotel, he had a solitary dinner in the coffee room and when he had finished it strolled out into the street and boarding an omnibus journeyed to Trafalgar Square and from there made his way down Northumberland Avenue to the river.

It was too early for the habitués of the Embankment to have settled for the night but he went and sat on a seat and tried to recapture some of the sensations he had been wont to experience on those other occasions, but he found the experiment too pungent for his liking and didn't persevere for long. The only thing it did was to accentuate his presumption in having dared to fall in love with Biddy and to strengthen his determination to "run away," as Mr. Peal had expressed it, without seeing her again, because, if he did see her, he must inevitably betray himself. It would be more than human endurance would be capable of to bid her farewell as if she were just a mere ordinary being who didn't matter much one way or the other. He would be bound to make a fool of himself and, if he did, he couldn't bear to carry with him into the outer darkness, as a last memory, the cold stare of contempt with which she would meet his impetuosity, if, throwing discretion to the winds, he so far forgot himself as to display his heart on his sleeve.

He walked back to the hotel because he felt the need of movement. It was no good brooding. The die had been cast. Very soon now he would have shaken the dust of his native land off his feet and all that had been, all that could never be, would have passed into the limbo of forgotten things, because out there, with a great gulf fixed

between him and his desire, he would compel forgetfulness. So he told himself, deliberately shutting his eyes to the fact that oblivion is not so easy of attainment and that memory, the master, not the servant of the brain, untrammelled by those physical conditions which confine the body in a limited area, is free to roam abroad as it will, bound neither by time nor distance.

He went into the smoking room when he reached the hotel, and sitting down at a writing table, proceeded to write his farewell letters to John and Biddy.

It was a more difficult task than he had anticipated. In the various epistles which he had sent them since they left Porth Ros, he had carefully omitted any reference to his plans for the future and had ignored the queries they had put from time to time respecting them, so it was no simple matter to suddenly and without warning break the news that he was leaving for Africa immediately; that, in point of fact, he would be gone by the time they received the intimation. They would think it a poor recompense after all they had done for him to be treated with such scant ceremony. That couldn't be helped. It took him more than an hour to find the words he wanted, and even then he felt dissatisfied with the result of his labours, but it was the best of which he was capable. To John he could write out more fully than he could to Biddy, for John knew how things stood with him, and he told him all without reserve, but Biddy was a different proposition. How was he to say enough without saying too much? How could he make her understand he was not ungrateful, in spite of his thankless behaviour to her, and yet modify his language sufficiently to keep out of it any trace of the longing which overwhelmed him as he realised what it was costing him to cut himself adrift? The effect was a rather stiff formal communication which stated bald facts without any attempts to mitigate them, and it was only in the concluding sentence that he allowed a hint of his true feelings to peep out.

"I was too afraid of myself to come and say good-bye,"

he wrote. "How can a shadow of the night linger on in the light of day? Do you remember my saying that to you the first time we met? The light has driven me away and I've got to go. Good-bye. God bless you always. Roger."

He put the letters into envelopes and when he had directed them, slipped them into the pocket of his coat. He mustn't post them tonight, otherwise they would reach their respective destinations before he had gone.

He went to bed but not to sleep. That insatiable longing, which the mere penning of his farewell letter to Biddy had aroused, refused to leave him, and it was a restless bedfellow. All night long it dug sharp claws into Roger's breast, and he tossed and turned through the hours of darkness unable to get away from it, until at half-past six, when the first faint glimmer of dawn stole into the room, he could bear it no longer but got up and dressing himself went downstairs and out into the open air, the intolerable ache of it all hounding him through the unawakened city streets, an Orestes pursued by the Furies who grinned and gibbered at his heels, snarling and yapping like a pack of craven curs, not daring to attack yet never granting him a moment's respite from their insistent clamour.

For two hours he paced the streets and at half-past eight, when the first signs of life began to stir around him he returned to the hotel, bathed and shaved himself, and by ten o'clock was on his way to Charing Cross en route for Harwood.

Now that he was on the eve of leaving England for good, (was it for good or evil?) it didn't seem to matter to him that he must face those who had suffered through his father's folly, his father's unreckoning love for him. All that mattered was that he must have *some* memory, to carry away with him into the outer darkness, of people who had once cared for him, of places connected with the days before the years had drawn nigh in which he had no pleasure.

There was no Dick Jolland to turn to now for comfort

and advice, but the whole neighbourhood was fragrant with memories of Dick and he had a kind of feeling that in Harwood he would be talking with ghosts, that there he would be nearer Dick than anywhere else, and he sorely needed comfort.

Those poignantly pathetic verses of William Cory's rang through his brain as he flashed through the country, with the trees flaunting their last remnants of finery in the dying leaves which still clung fluttering to the branches in patches of crimson and gold and bronze.

"They told me, Heraclitus, they told me you were dead.
They brought me bitter news to hear and bitter tears to shed.
I wept as I remembered how often you and I
Had tired the sun with talking, and sent him down the sky. . . .

And now that thou art lying, my dear old Carian guest
A handful of gray ashes, long long ago at rest,
Still are thy pleasant voices, thy nightingales awake,
For death he taketh all away, but them he cannot take."

There would be no nightingales now in the copses where he and Dick had often listened to them on moonlight nights in May. The pleasant voices would be silent, but there was not a lane, not a meadow, that would not speak to him of Dick. Each tree and bush would lean forward and whisper in his ear, "Do you remember?" Those memories at least were permitted, whatever others were forbidden him.

Roger followed the way from Tallis station which John had taken earlier in the year but the hedges which then had been full of the promise of Spring were now brown and bare, except here and there where the beeches clung tenaciously to their parchment leaves, refusing to let go of them.

He didn't however turn off across the fields to The Hill Plat, but skirted round by the road until he came to the

familiar vicarage neighbouring the little gray church with its lichen-covered roof of tiles.

He had no right now to enter the former, but he made his way into the latter.

The old sexton, pottering about on some business of his own, peered through his horn-rimmed glasses at the disturber of his peace, his dim eyes not recognising the newcomer.

"Hullo, Hebble, don't you know me?" Roger said, and at the sound of his voice old Hebblethwaite Trumbull dropped the armful of books he was carrying and shambled down the aisle towards him.

"Well, dang me, if it ain't Master Roger!" he exclaimed in high quavering accents. "Dang me, if it ain't! Dear, dear, dear! And where may you have been all this long time?"

"Oh, up and down, but mostly down," Roger said. "How are things here?"

The old man shook a dubious head.

"Not like they was in the late vicar's time," he complained. "Mr. Penry, he's a nice enough gentleman. I haven't no fault to find with him, but I can't foller these yer new-fangled ways o' going on. They put me out o' my reckoning. Mr. Penry *'owls* the prayers, he don't say 'em. Toning is what *he* calls it, so *I* calls Sunday the day o' 'tonement now. I told him so one day and he couldn't help but laugh, though I could see he wasn't best pleased inside. 'The day o' 'tonement, that's what I calls Sunday,' I sez to him (he laughed wheezily). Eh, well, he's young. Maybe he'll grow out of it. Are you making a long stay, Master Roger?"

"No. I'm off to Africa tomorrow. I only came to have a last look round at the old place."

"Dear, dear, dear! Off to Africa, are you? That's a main long way away, ain't it? Would it be a couple o' days in a boat?" enquired the old man.

"Four weeks and a bit over to the part I'm going to," Roger told him.

"Four weeks! That's a journey, now, ain't it? You'll be tired by the time you get there. Can you get food on the boat, do you reckon?"

Roger laughed.

"Oh, yes. I can get food on the boat all right," he said.

"I was thinking sandwiches 'ud be a bit stale by the time you got there if you had to carry your own, and a tidy big packet of 'em too you'd have to take. I once went on a boat at Brighton, that year your dad took the choir there for an outing. The *Skylark* it was called. I didn't reckon much of it, I remember."

"Were you sick?" Roger asked.

"No, I wasn't downrightly *sick* but I didn't feel easy in the stomach. Half an hour was enough for me. I couldn't have stood another half hour, let alone four weeks. It fair turns me to think of it, but I dessay the boat you go on 'ull be a bit bigger."

"Yes. A bit," Roger assented gravely.

"Africa! Let's see, the folk there are black, ain't they?"

"Some are. Not all."

"Well, I hope you'll keep your colour, I'm sure. You're well enough as you are. I can't seem to picture you black."

"I can't quite picture myself," Roger said. "We must hope for the best."

"Ah, that's the thing to do. Hope for the best and keep in the shade all you can. It's the sun does it, I've heard tell," counselled the old man. "When'll you be coming back?"

"I don't know. Perhaps never."

"Then I shan't see you again this side o' the grave," observed Trumbull in matter-of-fact tones. "There's just the chance we may meet beyond but it don't do to be too certain, though, to be sure, things often turn out different to what one expects. I'm glad to have had this sight of you anyhow, Master Roger."

"I must go now. Good-bye, Hebble."

" Good-bye, Master Roger."

Roger shook hands quickly and went out of the church. This severance of old ties was a hateful business. It hurt even to say good-bye to old Trumbull, and he half regretted having come, but now he was bound to go and see the Jollands. Hebble would be sure to tell them that he had seen Roger and that he was going to Africa, and it would wound them to the quick if he slunk off now without bidding them farewell. He made his way to The Hill Plat. Mrs. Jolland was in the kitchen with the door open and Roger walked straight in without knocking, as he had been accustomed to do in bygone days. She looked round as he entered and caught her breath at the sight of the familiar figure, but she kept her composure and greeted him as though it were only a matter of days since she had last set eyes on him.

" Why, Master Roger," she said. " It's good to see you back again, and how are you? You look — tired."

She substituted the word " tired " for " unhappy," which was what she had it in her mind to say.

" Well, Mother Louisa," Roger said, going up and kissing her, " you didn't expect to see me, did you?"

" I've been expecting you ever since Dick died," Mrs. Jolland said quietly. She was touched at the way he had called her by the old name he had given her in his childish days and by the natural unaffected manner in which he had kissed her, for it told her more than anything else could have done that whatever he had suffered it had not changed the Roger she had mothered as a little boy, the Roger who had come to her for comfort and coddling in all his baby troubles and griefs, the Roger whom her Dick had loved and moulded, and made a man of. So connected with Dick was he in her mind that, seeing him standing there, tall and strong and handsome, it almost seemed as if some part of her own dear son had returned to her. Some innate knowledge had told her that one of these days Roger would be unable to resist coming back, and ever since that visit John had paid her in May she had waited for this moment.

"I've come to say good-bye," Roger said, bursting out with the information without any preliminary leading up to the object of his unheralded arrival. "I'm going abroad tomorrow, to Africa."

A hardly perceptible quiver of apprehension ran through Mrs. Jolland. Dick, Berry, Walter, three of her boys, she had bade farewell to on their departure for distant lands, and now this other one who was so almost one of her boys, was following their example. Dick lay buried in an alien grave; Berry and Wally had both married in the countries of their adoption, and, except that they wrote to her regularly, were nearly as much separated from her as though they too had died, and now Roger, whom Dick, in the very last letter she ever had from him, had commended to her care, was found only to be lost again.

"What's taking you there?" she asked, resolutely choking back the protest which rose to her lips. If he was looking forward to going with pleasurable anticipations, she wouldn't spoil those anticipations by any display of disappointment; if he was dreading the break, she would not make it any harder for him by useless opposition. Besides, in either case, it was too late to alter things, even if she had felt inclined to do so.

"I've got a job," Roger said in answer to her question.

"A good one?"

"Good enough. It gets me out of England anyhow."

"You *want* to get out of England?"

"Yes I — I want to."

Something in Roger's voice made Mrs. Jolland glance at him sharply. She knew him so well from those old days when he had run in and out of her house like one of her own children that her keen "mother" sense could detect there was something behind all this assumption of carelessness. It was just the way he had spoken when anything had happened to hurt or injure him when he was a boy. He would swagger into her kitchen, his hands in his pockets, whistling unconcernedly, and after wandering round aim-

lessly for a few seconds, would announce casually, "I've cut myself a bit," and, removing a hand from a pocket, would hold out for inspection a finger sliced nearly to the bone as if it were something he thought might possibly interest a mere woman but which he considered was hardly worthy of a man's attention. She had always, on these occasions, treated the bandaging of the wound in the light of a concession to her feminine weakness and not a real necessity and had thus made Roger appear the dispenser and not the recipient of a favour.

It had been the same when he had been wounded in his pride. He would stroll in in an offhand manner which strove to convey the impression that, finding himself in the vicinity, he thought he'd look in and see what was doing and after the same absorption in the examination of the common articles of household use, which he had seen a hundred times before, would bring out the cause of his lacerated feelings as if it were of no importance whatever only he knew women liked that kind of rotten items of news. "Alf Gildersleeve told Dick I funked fighting Algie Raymond," and the statement would be followed by a little laugh which refused, in spite of all Roger's efforts, to convey the contempt which such a calumny deserved. Mrs. Jolland had known better than to show indignation at the baseness of the charge. All she had been used to say in token that the subject wasn't worth a moment's consideration was "How silly, and to Dick of all people! Will you run into the garden, Master Roger, and fetch me a handful of parsley?" and Roger would trot off to do her bidding and when he came back with the parsley or whatever else it might be that Mrs. Jolland had asked him to fetch for her, he would have forgotten the hurt to his pride, and no further mention would be made about it.

He had the same detached manner now as he had been used to have on those occasions and from it Mrs. Jolland clearly perceived that something, though what she could

not tell, had happened to make him "want to get out of England."

She would have given worlds to know what the reason was which was driving him away. She longed to be taken into his confidence,to feel that she was sufficiently important in his estimation to be entrusted with the motives which impelled that desire to shake the dust of his native land from off his feet, but she was too well acquainted with his moods of obstinacy to question him outright. The slightest suspicion that she was trying to force his hand and he would immediately curl up into his shell and no power on earth could dislodge him. If he chose to tell her it would come out casually, sooner or later; if he was determined to keep silence on the subject her longing would remain unsatisfied.

So Mrs. Jolland, being a sensible woman, refrained from plying him with vain questions as to causes and contented herself with more practical enquiries as to the name of his ship, the hour of his sailing and the likely date when he would arrive at his destination. She also incidentally found out the port for which he was bound and the nature of the job on which he was going.

"Did that nice Mr. Ffoulkes find it for you?" she asked, after she had ascertained what his work was, as far as Roger knew himself.

"No."

The curt monosyllable set her thoughts wandering in a new direction.

"Have you told him about it?" she enquired, a sudden suspicion rising in her mind to disquiet her.

"Not yet."

"You haven't quarrelled with him?" was the next question.

Roger laughed.

"Good Lord, *no*," he said. It takes two to make a quarrel, doesn't it? If I wanted to make one of them, old John would never make the other. It's only I don't want him to

know till I've actually sailed because I — I hate saying good-bye to people."

"But you've come down here to say good-bye to me," reasoned Mrs. Jolland.

"Yes, but you're — different."

How was she "different," Mrs. Jolland wondered, with a little stab at her heart. Was it then a matter of indifference to Roger to part with her who had mothered him? Was she of less account to him than this new friend? Why should it be less hateful to say good-bye to her than to Mr. Ffoulkes?

These and similar queries chased one another through Mrs. Jolland's brain as, outwardly unruffled, she went about her preparations for the mid-day meal, stirring her saucepans, basting the joint which slowly revolved in front of the kitchen fire on the old-fashioned spit which she still used in preference to baking it in the oven. It was only after due deliberation that Mrs. Jolland, with a recollection of his hesitancy over the statement that he hated saying good-bye to people, came to the conclusion that the reason Roger gave for not seeing Mr. Ffoulkes before he sailed was an excuse, and not the real explanation of his secrecy. That was it, of course. She saw it clearly now.

She was perhaps nearer to being angry with Roger than she had ever been before. Mr. Ffoulkes had been very kind to him. It was to Mr. Ffoulkes that Roger owed the job which had set him on his feet again and it wasn't right for him to treat his benefactor in this cavalier fashion.

"You know your business best, I suppose," she said at length, but all the same she wasn't altogether convinced that he did. He hadn't so many friends that he could afford to run the risk of offending one beyond redemption. She hated the idea of his appearing ungrateful to one who, above all others, deserved his gratitude, but she hated still more to blame him, even though it were only inwardly.

"It'll turn out for the best in the long run," she went on, as much to reassure herself as for anything else. "You'll come out on top, like you have before."

"I was dragged out on top," Roger said with candour.

"As long as you got there it doesn't seem to me it much matters whether you climbed or were pushed," Mrs. Jolland said straightforwardly. "I wonder now — "

But at this juncture Mr. Jolland, George and Winnie came in to their dinner, followed by the farm hands, and in the exclamations of delight and astonishment which ensued, Mrs. Jolland was recalled from her wonderings for the time.

Roger stayed with the Jollands till half-past five, and when he got up to go Mrs. Jolland came with him as far as the gate.

"I say, the post's gone, hasn't it?" he asked on the way.

"It went at a quarter past five," Mrs. Jolland said. "Did you want to catch it?"

Roger produced the two letters he had written in the hotel smoking room the night before.

"It doesn't matter," he said. "I wish you'd put these in the box, though."

"You can post them in London," Mrs. Jolland reminded him.

"Oh, they'll be safer if I give them to you. I — I might lose them."

"I will, if you like, of course."

Mrs. Jolland took the letters and put them into the pocket of her apron.

"I won't forget them," she said.

At the gate she paused.

"You'll — write and let me hear how you get on," she said. "Oh, Master Roger, my dear, why didn't you come back to me sooner? Why did you stop away when you needed me so badly? But there! It's no good talking about it now. You won't catch your train if you don't hurry."

Now that the hour for saying good-bye had come her one desire was to get it over and done with. It was horrible to prolong the agony.

"Come back, dear, to — to all who love you."

"Good-bye, Mother Louisa," Roger said, putting his arms round her and hugging her up to him. "Good-bye."

He kissed her hurriedly and was gone, swallowed up in the darkness.

She strained her eyes in the direction he had taken, but in any case she would not have been able to see him, even if it had been light, for they were blinded with tears.

She put her hand in her apron pocket to get out her handkerchief and in doing so felt the letters he had given her to post.

Why had he done that, she wondered, instead of posting them when he got back to town. They would lose half a day in getting to their respective destinations. A sudden idea struck her. He didn't *want* them to be delivered before he left England.

When she got back to the kitchen she took them out and looked at the addresses. With the sight of John's name on the second one an inspiration came to her.

She stood there for a minute, the envelope in her hand, cogitating.

"Father, what time's the next train to London?" she asked at last.

"Eight ten, but Master Roger'll catch the six thirty easy."

"I wasn't thinking about Master Roger," she said. "I was thinking about myself."

"*Yourself!*" Mr. Jolland stared at her as if he thought she had taken leave of her senses. "Why, whatever's taken hold of you? What on earth should you want gallivanting up to London in the dead of night?"

"I've got to see Mr. Ffoulkes," she said. "I *must* see Mr. Ffoulkes before Master Roger sails. There's something wrong. I've got to find out what it is. You mustn't stop me, Father. I haven't crossed your will in all the years I've been married, but I'm going to London tonight whether you forbid me or not. I've got to get this matter of Master

Roger's straightened out before he goes away. If I don't I'll never have another easy moment if I live to be a hundred. You can't prevent me, Father. Look," she pointed with a shaking hand to the card hanging on the wall. "A man has gone from this house! If Dick was here he wouldn't let Master Roger go without trying to set things to rights. Well, as he isn't here, I've got to act for him. George'll drive me to the station in the trap, won't you, George?"

She turned to her son who was sitting open mouthed.

"If you really mean to go, I will," he said, with a half-frightened glance in his father's direction. Mr. Jolland had been the arbiter of all their fates ever since he could remember and it upset all his preconceived notions that his mother should assume this dictatorial air and determine her own course of action.

"But where'll you sleep, Mother?" said Mr. Jolland helplessly. His wife's whirlwind methods had lifted him off his feet and he didn't feel equal to coping with the situation that had arisen.

"I'll go to a hotel," said Mrs. Jolland shortly, conscious she had gained her point. "I'll go and put some things in a bag."

"And I'll have some supper ready for you when you come down," Winnie said, ranging herself definitely on her mother's side.

"I suppose I'm playing double with Master Roger," Mrs. Jolland said to herself, as she rumbled Londonwards, "but there's something amiss. Mr. Ffoulkes'll know what to do for the best. And after all," she reflected, "if I choose to save the postman and deliver a letter for him, it's not the fault of the post office if it gets there a post too soon." With which sophistry she lulled her conscience to rest, and dismissed the matter from her mind.

CHAPTER XXIII

SINCE leaving Porth Ros at the end of his holidays John had more than once wondered, with a certain amount of misgiving, whether he could have acted differently to the way he did in the matter of Biddy and Roger.

He was quite sure that he had not been mistaken in his surmises but the very fact that he had stumbled upon Biddy's secret by accident made it seem impossible that he should betray it. It would, he felt, be like betraying a secret of the confessional even though in this case there had been no spoken confession. Besides, there was just the bare possibility that he had been mistaken. He had only guesswork to go upon and there was the one chance in a hundred that he might have guessed wrong. If so and he had definitely told Roger that Biddy was in love with him, the already complex situation would have become still more involved than it was at present. He had done all he could in urging Roger to tell Biddy that he loved her. It had cost him a good deal to do even this much. It had required self-abnegation of the highest order to try deliberately to persuade another man to ask the woman whom he loved himself to marry him but he had put self into the background and done this thing. He could have done no more.

He was too well acquainted with Roger's obstinate nature to expect to meet with any success in his attempt to override his fixed determination to regard Biddy's money as an insurmountable obstacle between him and her, added to which there was that vow Roger had taken. Absurd as that had been John could hardly ignore it and, in the face of it, set to work to induce Roger to forswear himself. To John an oath, even if it were taken without due consideration of the consequences attaching, was not a thing to be lightly put on one side if occasion required. Such a

course of procedure was, to him, unthinkable. The oath was, in itself, a sufficient reason for his keeping silence,

So he argued with himself but all the same there were times when he had to go over the ground afresh and reassure himself. It was all a hopeless muddle, an impasse out of which there appeared to be no way, a riddle to which there was no answer.

Therefore when Mrs. Jolland, on the morning following Roger's visit to Harwood, that visit when he had given her those letters to post, arrived at John's rooms in Eddis Street, flustered and bewildered by the miles she had had to traverse in order to reach them, he was brought up sharply against the horns of a dilemma.

He must, definitely and at once, decide upon a course of action. There was no time in which to sit down and think things over. He must either do something straight away or leave the matter where it stood, which was equivalent to letting it slide altogether.

Mrs. Jolland's unexpected advent had found John unprepared. He had been imagining Roger still at Porth Ros and to learn suddenly that he was starting for Africa that very day, almost, it might be said, that very hour, upset his calculations.

For Roger to go off without a word made it appear on the surface as though he was going out of his way to show that he had no longer any use for John's friendship.

John knew it was not so really. The letter Mrs. Jolland had brought with her proved that for it stated fairly Roger's reasons for behaving as he was doing and between the written lines could be read the loneliness and bitterness of the boy's soul.

What a hideous muddle it all was! Here were two people who loved one another and false pride and self-will were keeping them apart. There didn't seem any loophole of escape that he could see.

He looked at Mrs. Jolland sitting there, outwardly calm and placid, showing none of the emotion stirring beneath

her unruffled exterior, as a broad stream gives no sign of the currents swirling and eddying beneath its unruffled surface.

She had recovered from the perturbation which her journey had caused her and was once more the serene motherly woman to whom Roger had been accustomed to bring his childish troubles and griefs, ready to hide her own feelings if, by so doing, she could gain his confidence and give him comfort.

John felt the influence of her serenity and, on a sudden impulse, thrust the letter into her hands.

"Read this," he said.

She took it into her hands and it was only the slight trembling of them which showed how stirred she really was.

She made no demur about reading this letter of Roger's as another might have done. She was prepared to go to any lengths to help "Master Roger" and if Mr. Ffoulkes thought it desirable for her to learn the contents of this communication she was willing to abide by his decision.

"Dear old chap," she read, "you'll be thinking me a callous brute to go off like this without making any attempt to see you and say good-bye. When you get this I shall be on my way to Africa where I've got a job through the kindness of Mrs. Panter. If things had panned out differently I couldn't have left England without coming to see you and thank you for all you have done for me. As it is, I feel it would be a bit too invidious to bid you farewell and not do the same to Biddy and that I daren't do.

"My feelings haven't changed in that direction. I shall never love any other woman as I love her. I shall never love any other woman again. There can't be two women in one's life that count in the way she has counted in mine. I haven't any doubt about that. If I didn't love her so *awfully* perhaps her money wouldn't have come between us but, as it is, I daren't risk making her unhappy. I've sworn and I'll keep my oath, whatever the cost.

"What has she to do with me, a shadow of the night? Some day, old man, when Biddy is safely married to somebody else, tell her about all this. The thought of her married to anyone else is hell but it has to be faced for she is too sweet and dear to be passed over. Damn the fellow whoever he is. He's a lucky chap!

"You've been the truest and best pal a man could wish for, old man. Whatever else has come of it, you've recreated me and made me a man again. God bless you for it. I'll write sometimes if I may and if I haven't counted myself out by ratting off like this without a word to you, my good Samaritan. Try to understand and forgive. Roger."

Mrs. Jolland made no comment while she read the letter and, when she had finished it, handed it back to John.

"This oath he talks about. What is it?" she asked, after a moment's pause.

"You see, Mrs. Rycroft is very rich," John explained, "and Roger, the obstinate young idiot, has sworn not to ask her to marry him because he believes people will think he only married her for her money. Of course it's the most absolute rubbish but there it is."

Mrs. Jolland nodded.

"That's him all over," she said. "He's as proud as Lucifer. What ever difference does her being rich make if they love one another? *Does* this lady you speak about love him, Mr. Ffoulkes?"

"I'm afraid she does, Mrs. Jolland."

"Is she — nice?"

"Yes, she is."

Something in the way John uttered the simple words caused Mrs. Jolland to look at him with sudden keen perception. There was a kind of defiant ring in them which seemed to resent any hint of criticism in discussing this lady, which aroused her suspicions.

"I believe he's in love with her himself, poor gentleman," was her unspoken thought.

"What's to be done about it?" John asked, growing restive under her scrutiny.

Mrs. Jolland considered.

"If it's as you say, and she's really in love with him, she ought to be given the chance."

"The chance of what?"

"Of proving it."

"But how can she do that if Roger has made this ridiculous vow? He can't go back on that. You see, it wasn't as if he just said 'I swear I won't marry her.' He put it much more strongly than that."

"How much more strongly?"

"He said, 'I swear by Almighty God.' I couldn't do anything to help him break a solemn oath like that, could I?"

"I suppose you couldn't," Mrs. Jolland said regretfully. "Besides, if you could, he wouldn't break it himself. Master Roger never went back on his word yet. That's one of the things Dick taught him."

"So there we are, you see," John said, throwing out his hands in despair. "What can we do?"

"You say it's just this money has frightened Master Roger away? Very well then. If this lady loves him truly she'll let this money go sooner than run the risk of losing him altogether. You must go to her, Mr. Ffoulkes, and tell her all about it, and leave her to choose."

John looked at her in startled amazement.

"Oh, I couldn't do that," he said hurriedly. "She's never told me anything. It's pure guesswork on my part and I may be quite wrong about it."

"You may be quite right," Mrs. Jolland said composedly. "That's what you've got to find out. If you *are* wrong there's no great harm done, but if you're right — "

"You don't know what it is you're asking me to do," John interrupted her sharply.

"I think I do, Sir," returned Mrs. Jolland quietly. "I'm asking you to do what, perhaps, is the hardest thing that

has ever come your way but I'm not asking too much if you're what I take you to be. We all have our chances. Whether we take them or not is another matter. Master Roger had his and allowed his stubborn pride to interfere. It rests with you, Mr. Ffoulkes, whether this lady is to be given hers. That's *your* chance."

"And Roger's second! It seems so unfair," John said, rebelliously.

"Love always *is* unfair on one side or the other," Mrs. Jolland observed, not pedantically but merely stating a fact. "If love was perfect on both sides there would be no need for unselfishness in it and it seems to me that it is that loves feeds on. Even God's love is made perfect because of human weakness. But just listen to me now, preaching a sermon to a clergyman!"

"Sometimes clergymen need sermons as much, or perhaps more, than other people," acknowledged John readily. "You've made me ashamed of myself, Mrs. Jolland. Do you happen to know what time the boat-train goes?"

"One o'clock he has to be on board at Tilbury," she told him.

John looked at his watch.

"There's not too much time if she's to get to Liverpool Street in time to catch him," he said.

"Then you're going to her?" Mrs. Jolland asked.

"Yes."

The curt monosyllable was as much as he could manage. He couldn't enlarge upon the subject. Once again he had fought and overthrown self but, for the moment, he could find no satisfaction in the knowledge.

There was a certain amount of inevitable delay before John could make a start. He had had to see his vicar and arrange with him to be away. There had been a considerable difficulty in getting a taxi and, when he did succeed, he had had to drop Mrs. Jolland at Charing Cross on his way.

He had also called at the shipping offices in Cockspur

Street and ascertained what time the special train left for Tilbury, having previously discovered the name of Roger's boat from Mrs. Jolland, so that it was a few minutes past eleven before he reached Biddy's house and, since it was twelve that the train left, there was no time to be lost.

He groaned aloud in despair when Barnby informed him that Biddy was out. What was to be done now?

"Would you care to see Miss Bellamy, Sir?" the man asked.

With the astuteness of the servant mind Barnby gathered that something out of the ordinary was afoot and he displayed an anxiety to assist which was not entirely devoid of self-interest. Barnby had gleaned that a domestic crisis was pending and he wished to bring it to a head so as to have it quite clear whether he himself would be adversely affected by it. Insecurity of tenure didn't suit his books.

John, after hasty cogitation, decided that he *would* see Miss Bellamy and was ushered up to the drawing room with a ceremoniousness which Barnby reserved for special occasions.

Miss Bellamy was writing letters but she put down her pen when John was announced and rose to meet him with an absence of surprise at which he was somewhat astonished, considering the hour and the fact that Wednesday was, as Miss Bellamy well knew, not his usual day for coming there.

"I suppose you've heard from Biddy," she said, without waiting for formalities.

John looked mystified.

"Does she know then?"

He felt that it was rather an anti-climax if he had made all this hurroosh to tell her something she was already aware of.

"Know? Know what?" Miss Bellamy asked him, mystified in her turn.

"About Roger going to Africa."

"*What!*"

Miss Bellamy shot out the word with such suddenness that John jumped.

"Roger's sailing for Africa today," John said.

"Today," gasped Miss Bellamy, sinking down upon the nearest chair. "But why? He never mentioned it in his letters to Biddy. We thought he was still at Porth Ros."

"So did I, but he wasn't, you see. I only heard about it myself this morning. You'd better read this."

He held out the letter to her and she snatched it out of his hands and eagerly read it through.

"The irony of fate," she remarked with a rather grim smile, when she had mastered its contents.

"What do you mean?" enquired John.

"I mean that, at this precise moment, Biddy is at her solicitor's office making over Colonel Rycroft's money to some odd relatives of his whom she has run to earth."

John blinked at her uncomprehendingly.

"Making over Colonel Rycroft's money," he repeated stupidly. "But whatever for?"

"This," said Miss Bellamy, smacking the letter she held in her hand quite viciously.

"But — but did she know?"

"Of course she knew," Miss Bellamy snorted. "She knew before we left Porth Ros. If you and Roger will persist in holding intimate conversations at the pitch of your voices on an open beach you must not be surprised if you are overheard."

"That night — the night Roger — " John began, then paused uncertainly.

"Exactly. That night — the night Roger — " mimicked Miss Bellamy, "Biddy happened to be standing on the steps when Roger was holding forth about her money being a bar to his telling her that he loved her. Apparently, though I never knew until it was too late to interfere, she made up her mind on the spot to get rid of it and, by a curious coincidence, the very day after we got back to London, she discovered these relations of her husband's,

of whose existence she had hitherto been unaware, and determined to settle it all on them."

"Would you have tried to dissuade her if you *had* known?" John enquired.

Miss Bellamy considered before she replied.

"I'm not quite sure. It all seems a little quixotic and it rather annoys me that, because Roger strains at a gnat, Biddy should have to swallow a camel but, as against that, it gets her out of the clutches of the Panter person, which is something to be grateful for."

"Not unless we can catch Roger before he goes."

"She'll follow him if necessary," Miss Bellamy said, confidently. "The Panter woman has delivered herself into our hands as evidenced in this letter. She's not the sort to do something for nothing. You may be sure she has an ulterior motive in getting this job for Roger. The thought of scoring her off almost reconciles me to this hare-brained scheme of Biddy's. What about telephoning to Biddy at her solicitor's? What time does the train leave?"

John told her.

"Three quarters of an hour from now. It'll be touch and go. Look here. You'd better start off straight away to Chancery Lane, pick her up there, and take her on to Liverpool Street while I do the telephoning."

"What will you tell her?" asked John doubtfully.

"You leave that to me," said Miss Bellamy firmly. "When once I get going I don't beat about the bush, I can assure you. Not that she'll want much telling! I don't suppose she'll bother about details."

"Then I'll be off," John announced. "What's the number in Chancery Lane, by the way?"

Miss Bellamy gave him the necessary information and he dashed out of the room.

She followed him out on to the landing and leaned over the banisters.

"If you think it will do him any good you can give Roger my love," she called down after him.

John, slipping in and out of the traffic in his taxi, glanced anxiously at any clocks he passed en route for Chancery Lane. At St. Martin's Church his cab was held up for some precious minutes by a policeman and in the Strand half the road was up and a slow-moving dray prevented the driver from proceeding at more than a snail's pace, so that it was twenty to twelve before he stopped at the door of the block of buildings in which the offices of Messrs. Viney, Hamnett & Pearce were situated.

Biddy was on the steps, looking impatiently up and down the road, and directly she caught sight of John she ran down them and was at the door of the taxi almost before it had drawn up beside the curb.

"Shall we do it?" she asked breathlessly as she got into the cab without waiting for John to alight.

"It'll be touch and go," John replied.

"Will you let me see the letter, please?" she demanded as soon as they were under way again.

Miss Bellamy, it was evident, had acquainted her with the exact position of affairs, for Biddy made the request as though it were her right to read what Roger had written and John put it into the hand she held out, without comment.

She read it through in silence and when she had finished there was a tender little smile on her lips although they were trembling as if she were not very far off tears.

She did not give it back but sat there holding it in her hand.

"I want to keep it," she explained.

It was two minutes to the hour when the cab turned down the slope leading to the departure platform.

Biddy was on the side nearest to the booking office and, almost before the cab was at a standstill, was out of it and running into the station.

John stopped to pay the driver and then sprinted after her but by the time he reached the platform she was out of sight.

"Where does the special for Tilbury start from?" he enquired of a passing porter.

"From the bay up yonder but she's due out now. You'll miss her," the man said, and even as he spoke, a few cheers coming from the direction the porter indicated fell upon John's ears, mingled with the sound of escaping steam, and he saw the train slowly drawing out of the bay. They were too late! Roger had gone.

John went on and presently saw Biddy coming towards him.

"Oh, John!" was all she said, her voice breaking on the words in a little sob, while two tears forced themselves from beneath her eyelids and trickled down her cheeks.

"Cheer up, Biddy," John said valiantly. "Look here, I'll tell you what. We'll taxi down to Tilbury. We shall get there almost as soon as the train. Come along."

They hurried out of the station and, after a little delay, secured a cab, the driver of which was willing to undertake the journey.

The road to Tilbury from London is not an inspiriting one. Biddy hardly spoke as mile after mile unwound itself in front of their eyes, but she stole a cold little hand into John's as though it comforted her to feel the warm clasp of his upon it.

It didn't comfort John however. He did not altogether appreciate being assigned the rôle of elder brother thus definitely. It gave him a sort of lonely feeling. He had to shut his lips tight together lest his emotions should overpower him and rise to the surface.

It was a quarter to one when they arrived at the Dock station at Tilbury. They made their way down to the place where they were told the tender for the *Cape Noon* was waiting to take out the passengers to the ship which was lying out in the river. The train had already been in some time and round the shore end of the gangway leading to the tender was a surging crowd of people, some pressing forward to get on board, others lingering behind bidding

farewell to their friends who had come to see them off. A few of the women were crying quietly and one, an elderly one, was stroking the face of a youngish man, evidently her son from whom she was parting, with fingers that shook as though they were palsied.

"I'm too old. I'm too old," she was repeating over and over again in a wailing voice, as John and Biddy passed her.

"Don't you fret, Mum. I'll come back to you one of these days," they heard the man say, in tones which belied his brave efforts to make them convincing, but the poor creature refused to be comforted.

"I'm too old," she whimpered once again.

"Oh, John! It's awful," Biddy said, pressing closer to him. "I don't wonder Roger funked it."

She scanned the throng of people eagerly, trying to distinguish Roger among them and at last she saw him.

"There he is," she caught John by the sleeve. "Go and bring him to me. I'll wait here by this block!"

They were close to one of the iron pillars over which the cable was slipped which kept the bows of the tender from swinging out into the stream.

John elbowed his way through the crowd toward Roger, who was standing a little distance in front, suitcase in hand.

Some extra sense seemed to warn him of John's approach for, before the latter came up with him, he turned and looked behind him.

At the sight of John he stiffened.

"So that damned woman broke her promise," he said fiercely, as John reached his side. "Or was it old Peal?"

"Never mind about that now, old chap. Biddy's here. She wants to see you," John remarked quietly.

Roger gulped down something in his throat.

"It won't do any good," he said doggedly. "God, man! Can't I even be allowed to clear out in peace? I won't see her. I — I couldn't stick it if I did."

"*She's* got to stick it," John said. "Are you going to make it worse for her than it is already?"

Roger looked at him in a frightened way.

"What d'you mean?" he asked.

"Let her tell you," John said. "I'll tell you this much. If you refuse to see her now, you'll repent it every day and every hour to the end of your life."

"It won't do any good," Roger said again, but this time he hesitated perceptibly and John, seizing his opportunity, took hold of him by the arm and turned him round.

"There she is," he said simply, pointing her out and, almost as though drawn by invisible cords, Roger moved slowly forward in the direction where she stood waiting.

Nearer and nearer he drew until he was within a couple of paces of her when she moved forward to meet him and, in doing so, caught her foot in a coil of rope and, tripping, would have fallen, had not Roger instinctively put out his arms to catch her.

For a few seconds they remained thus, then Roger recollected himself and, with a little groan, freed her from his encircling arms. Freed her, but found that he was not free himself, for her hands were locked at the back of his neck and, short of by physical force, he could not release himself.

Her upturned face was only just below the level of his so that he had but to bend his head to touch her lips with his and he resolutely turned it aside lest he might be unable to resist the temptation they offered, but Biddy shifted her left hand and, with the palm of it pressing against his cheek, slowly forced it back to its original position. He had either to look at her or shut his eyes and he chose the latter alternative because he dared not risk the former.

So many people were bidding one another farewell all around them that they attracted no particular attention and John had not attempted to follow Roger but was standing on the spot where he had overtaken him, feigning an

interest in the scenes taking place in his immediate vicinity which he was far from feeling.

"Roger," Biddy whispered, "was it me or my money you were running away from?"

"For God's sake, Biddy," he besought her.

"Tell me," she insisted.

His mouth shut like a trap and he made no reply to the question.

"Dear silly," she said. "It's Love versus Pride — and Love wins."

"Biddy!" In the shock of surprise Roger opened his eyes and stared at her. "Who told you that?"

"My heart," she answered, wilfully misinterpreting his meaning.

"You don't understand," he said despairingly. "For God's sake let me go and don't torture me any longer." He struggled to get free.

"I won't let you go," she declared vehemently. "You belong to me."

"How can I? Oh, can't you see the great gulf between us? I'm nothing but a shadow of the night and you're — you're the sunshine. We can have nothing in common."

"Not even love?"

"Don't ask me that," he said piteously. "How can I make you understand?"

"Perhaps I do," she said. "Roger, you haven't answered my question yet. Were you running away from *me?*"

"No." The word came out with an effort.

"Then it was my money?"

"Yes."

"Dear, I knew it before I asked, only I wanted to hear it from your own lips. You see, I happened to overhear what you said, that night on Morant Beach."

"You overheard? Then you heard — " Roger began, then paused uncertainly, groping for the necessary words.

"I heard the oath you took," Biddy said.

"It still holds good," Roger said doggedly.

"Let it," she replied. "That miserable money needn't stand between us any longer because it's no longer mine."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean I've given it back to those to whom it rightly belonged, because — because, you see, I happened to — to love you best."

"Biddy! You — you care for me as much as *that?*"

"I care for you *more* than that," she whispered.

Once again his arms were round her and now he made no attempt to resist the temptation of those lips so close to his since there was no longer any need.

John, glancing in their direction, saw them clinging to one another and turned his head away again quickly, his mouth twisted in a rather wry smile. He tried his utmost to feel glad that things had come right between these two whom he loved, but, in spite of himself, he could not help a pang of anguish darting through his heart at the sight. They had no thought to spare for him. He was less than nothing to them — just the unwanted third. He suddenly felt tired and old and very lonely.

The last few passengers were crossing the gangway to the tender before Biddy and Roger came down to where he waited.

"Well?" he said.

"It *is* well, John," Biddy said, her eyes shining, her cheeks softly flushed with pink. "I'm going out to him a month from now."

"Dear old John," Roger said. "I wish you could come out and marry us."

With an heroic effort John forced himself to smile.

"I'm afraid that's asking a bit too much," he said. "My — my people couldn't spare me."

He turned away that he might not appear to be watching the final leave-taking before Roger went on board.

A little sighing breeze, borne on the outgoing tide, floated down the river and it sounded in John's ears like a lament played softly over the grave of his buried hopes.

He and Biddy and Roger!

Three little cogs in the vast machinery of the world each in its appointed place. Ah, well! The Mechanician had put them where they were. He knew His job.

THE END

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